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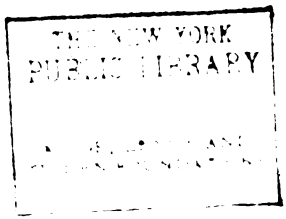


THE INTERVENING LADY








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THE INTERVENING LADY





BOOK I

THE CHILD

THE INTERVENING LADY

CHAPTER I

BROOME'S EVASION

AS the Prime Minister ate his breakfast he kept looking toward the door. Little as he was aware of it, he was wont to sit in a somewhat nervous expectation till his niece came, for the violence of her entry was sometimes nerve-shattering, partaking of the nature of the arrival of one of the more active natural phenomena—a whirlwind, a waterspout, or an earthquake.

This morning, however, she entered sedately, a child of a vivid dark beauty such as Sir Joshua Reynolds loved to paint, kissed him quietly, sat down at the table and plunged into her usual daily excuses for her lateness. In the middle of them a glance at her uncle's face filled her with such astonishment that she stopped short to stare at him. He wore a cheerful air.

"Why—why, what's the matter, uncle?" she cried in the accents of the liveliest surprise.

"The matter?" said the Prime Minister, surprised in his turn.

"Yes; you looked pleased—quite pleased."

"Well, surely there is nothing odd in that," said the Prime Minister, sitting up a little more stiffly in his chair.

"No—oh, no," said the Lady Noggs. "Only you never do." And she addressed herself to her breakfast with a thoughtful air.

Presently the Prime Minister started their usual conversation. He inquired about her doings the day before; and after she told him as much as she thought would not hurt his feelings—omitting, that is, her more interesting and spirited actions—she asked him politely about the state of Europe. He gratified her polite curiosity; then he took up a letter lying beside his plate, and said: "Aunt Caroline has invited you to go and stay with her for a fortnight."

Her face fell, and she said mournfully:

"Oh, has she?" Then suddenly she sat up, looked at him sternly, and said: "Now I know why you were looking pleased. You were glad I was going away."

This was the truth of the matter. The Prime Minister had been rejoicing, unconsciously, that he was going to enjoy a fortnight's relief from the somewhat wearing expectation of sudden tidings of a new exploit of his ingenious niece. Moreover, he was going to get that relief with the full approval of his scrupulous soul, for he believed that the annual fortnight's visit to his evangelical aunt did the Lady Noggs a world of good, since she always returned from it quieter and gentler.

But he felt bound to protest against the charge, and he said with some show of sincerity: "Nonsense, Felicia!"

"And after I've been so nice to you for such a long time," said the Lady Noggs with a deeper mournfulness.

The Prime Minister said tartly that little girls should not permit themselves insinuations of disingenuousness in their elders. With even deeper mournfulness the Lady Noggs said: "Ah! now you're angry"; and breakfast ended coldly.

For the next two days the Lady Noggs went about the world mournfully; she refused to be cheered by the assurances of her friend Mr. Borrodaile, a rising politician, who had formerly been her uncle's secretary, and had come down to Stonorill

to act again as his secretary till a satisfactory successor to him should be found. He declared that on her return she would enjoy Stonorill all the more for the visit to her great-aunt. And on Wednesday she set out for London in a state of extreme glumness.

Lady Caroline Adney was one of the best women in the world. She kept up but a small establishment in Grimestone Square, the very gloomiest square in London, that she might have the more money to spend on good works. She was indefatigable in well-doing. But the Lady Noggs hated the house for its dulness; and it was, indeed, far too solemn an abode for a child. The servants were old and austere; their mistress did not understand that you had better set yourself on the safe side by enjoying all possible cheerfulness as a child, since you may find it hard to come by when you grow older. She lost no time in plunging the Lady Noggs into a veritable bath of seriousness. As soon as she arrived she examined her in the church catechism, and in the evening took her to hear her favorite preacher of the moment, who was conducting a mission in a neighboring church.

The Lady Noggs had spent sixteen hours with her great-aunt in an intolerable boredom without

finding occasion for one smile; then, after breakfast, she was turned into the garden in the middle of the square, since some committees demanded all her aunt's attention. The garden matches the square. Somber shrubs of incredibly gloomy greens struggle unhappily, under dismal and stunted limes, along the railings which hedge it in. The borders of these shrubberies are set freely with those sedge-like plants which afford such an agreeable pasturage to snails; indeed, there are more snails in a square yard of the garden of Grimestone Square than in any other square yard of the rest of the British Empire. The flowers are of the sickliest, and the turf in the middle wears the fewest possible blades of grass consistent with the decency required of a plot in a respectable square.

Into this urban paradise the Lady Noggs was turned to take the air, since in it she did not need the guardianship of any of her aunt's servants. She strolled along the path, bored and disconsolate, eying the well-meaning but ineffectual vegetation with a pity not untinged by contempt, longing for Stenorill. Then, rounding a corner, she came suddenly upon the Adam of the paradise, a little white-faced boy of about her own age, thin and large-eyed, shabbily dressed, of an utterly neglected and

unkempt air. The Lady Noggs drew in these details with a polite half-veiled glance as she passed him. But the little boy stood stock-still and stared at her with wide eyes and open mouth, as one dazzled by a shining vision; and, indeed, in that gloomy garden her dark vivid beauty shone with an amazing brilliance.

The Lady Noggs, indifferent from long use to the impression her beauty had made on him, sauntered on, growing more and more displeased with the garden. Presently she became aware that the little boy was watching her, or rather spying upon her, with the greatest interest. To all seeming he had not the courage to meet her again face to face. He lay in wait among the shrubs on the edge of the path; stared at her with devouring eyes as she passed; then ran across the lawn and lay in wait for her in another clump. He seemed to her lacking in ability, for he hid himself very badly indeed.

After some minutes of these ambushes, the Lady Noggs, for the thousandth time in her brief life, found herself involved in a struggle with true politeness. She knew well that true politeness demands that you ignore utterly a fellow creature till a third fellow creature has made you acquainted. But the garden was dull, and she was very near yawning.

She was sure that the little boy wanted to know her; but she was no less sure that, if she waited for him to make the first advances their making acquaintance would be a matter of days. Delay had never any charm for her ardent spirit. Accordingly, the next time she passed the hidden watcher she stopped short, and said: "How do you do?"

The little boy thrust a startled scarlet face out of his leafy screen, stuttered an incoherent phrase, withdrew behind the laurel veil, kicked feebly at the laurel trunk, then bolted to another lair. The Lady Noggs, though never shy herself, knew what shyness was in others, and perceived that she must give him time. She sauntered on round the garden, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Maintaining this attitude of lofty indifference she had made one complete circuit of the garden and was half-way round it again, when the little boy came out on the lawn sprawled about, rolled over and over two or three times without a glance at her, then, as a crowning exploit, tumbled clumsily head over heals. He was moved, doubtless, to this course of action by the sentiments which cause the peacock to spread his tail for the admiration of his mate. The Lady Noggs observed that he was a feeble

little boy; his somersault showed neither strength nor agility.

She walked on, wishing that he would be a little less active and a little more sociable. As soon as she was out of sight of the lawn he ran into the bushes to look at her again as she passed. She saw him, stopped again, and said with some firmness: "Look here, this is a silly way of playing hide-and-seek. Let's play it properly. I'll shut my eyes, and you go and hide."

The little boy stared at her, flushing redder and redder, then he said, "V-v-very well." And off he ran.

She found him; then she hid. By the time they had hidden and sought thrice they had grown quite intimate. He had learned that her name was Felicia, and that her friends called her Noggs; she had learned that his name was Michael Stanhope Broome, and that he lived with his aunt. After half an hour's hide-and-seek the Lady Noggs threw herself down on the lawn and said, "Let's rest."

The little boy sat down in front of her and gazed at her with the most direct and uncompromising admiration.

"This is a beastly garden!" said the Lady Noggs with her wonted frankness.

"Oh, no; it's splendid!" cried the little boy, hurt and indignant. "Why, I almost live in it in the summer—every fine day, and sometimes wet ones."

"But it's so dingy," said the Lady Noggs.

"Well, it's not so bright as the Zoo, of course. I went to the Zoo once—a housemaid we had, called Sarah, took me. But then the Zoo's so much bigger. But this is a beautiful garden. I know every bit of it. And whatever should I do without it?" His face fell at the thought.

The Lady Noggs felt sorry indeed for him that he should think this dismal enclosure beautiful.

"Why, sometimes—quite often—pigeons come into this garden, and butterflies," he said. "I saw three butterflies in it last summer. And there are lots of bees; and at night there's moths—dozens. And then the sparrows—why, there are hundreds and hundreds, and four of their nests are in the trees. Oh, it isn't dingy at all. There are lots of things in it. Just think of the snails alone—all sizes."

The Lady Noggs, thinking of the Stonorill gardens, felt sorrier for him. But she was too polite to disabuse his mind of its exaggerations; she changed the subject, and said: "But how can you

spend all day in the garden? Don't you do any lessons?"

He shook his head and said: "No, I don't do any lessons; and they don't want me about the house. Aunt's friends don't like children; and our two servants don't like them either. Once—oh, more than a year ago—we had a nice housemaid, called Sarah; and she let me be in the kitchen and talk to her ever so much. And she took me to the Zoo."

"Doesn't your aunt like children?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, aunt doesn't get up till late, and then she hasn't any time to talk, she's so much sought after."

"Sought after?" said the Lady Noggs, who did not know the phrase.

"Yes, very much sought after. Sarah told me so," said the little boy proudly. "Her friends are always wanting her—such beautiful ladies some of them."

"But don't you ever have dinner with her?"

"Sometimes," said the little boy, hesitating. "But she isn't often in to dinner; and besides it bothers her nerves to have children about. She says so. Her nerves are often very bad."

They were silent for a minute; then the Lady Noggs said: "I suppose you haven't a mother?"

"No; she died when I was a baby," said the little boy.

"So did mine," said the Lady Noggs.

"But I've got a father, though. He's a ruler in India; Sarah told me so."

"I haven't got a father," said the Lady Noggs. "But I've got an uncle who's a ruler—at least, he's Prime Minister; and Miss Caldecott—she was my governess—said a Prime Minister is a virtual ruler."

"I suppose he's called a virtual ruler because he's so good," said the little boy, after a thoughtful pause.

"Yes; uncle's awfully good," said the Lady Noggs in a somewhat disparaging tone. "It's funny we should both be connected with rulers."

"I'm glad," said the little boy. "It's—it's nice to be the same."

"I think I shall call you Michael, and you may call me Noggs," said the Lady Noggs. "And now let's play something else."

Michael again blushed faintly as he said: "I'm afraid I don't know any game. You see, I haven't any one to play with—only years ago when my father came home, and he took me to the seaside; and there were sands and children to play with, and we made castles. It was splendid."

"But I often don't have any one to play with for ever so long, and I play games out of books. Don't you?"

"Oh, yes; I play those sort of games with myself," cried Michael. "But I didn't know any one else did. I play them out of the *Arabian Nights*. There's lots of caves in this garden. Sindbad's cave, where the giant with one eye was, and Aladdin's, and the cave of the Forty Thieves. And sometimes I'm Harun-al-Raschid and the garden is Bagdad, and I go about it at night; and the different people's houses are in different parts. Zobaid's, where the calendars came, is over there." And he pointed to the middle of the shrubbery.

"I never played at those," said the Lady Noggs. "I play at Sleeping Beauty, and 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.' Let's play at that. I saw a tree which would make a very good tower. You shall be the Prince; it will be quite nice to have a real live Prince."

Michael accepted the proposal with rapture. The Lady Noggs climbed up into a sooty tree, and ingeniously used her sash as the necessary long hair. Michael, however, though he put a bold face on it, was prevented from enjoying greatly the dalliance

on the tower, owing to his abiding fear of tumbling out of it, for he had never made this use of a tree before, and proved somewhat clumsy with it. Indeed, he was glad when the killing of the witch left them free to descend. Even the Lady Noggs found the tower somewhat disheartening. She had climbed it with the greatest care not to tear her frock, and so far she had succeeded. But whereas the frock had been clean, on her descent she found it besmirched with a clinging sootiness which was not only proof against all attempts to brush it off, but had also spread itself over her face in a fashion that prevented her playing the sleeping beauty with a whole-hearted sense of her fitness for the part. Indeed, when lunch-time came she had to make a judicial bolt down her aunt's area and up the back stairs to her room. There she removed with soap and water all traces of the romantic episode, put on another frock, and so escaped the danger of being forbidden the garden.

As soon as lunch was over she fled hastily to the garden, and since with her busy aunt to be out of sight was to be out of mind, she was left in it untroubled. She and Michael played many games, and after a rapturous afternoon in a new and gor-

geous world he said, "This has been a splendid day!"

The words and Michael's enraptured face as he uttered them clung to the Lady Noggs all the evening, so deeply did they impress her. To her the day had been of no uncommon splendor; indeed, it had not been splendid at all. The quality of her play with Michael had not been high. His extravagant delight in it brought home to her, not very clearly, but clearly enough, the emptiness of his life. She resolved that she must change this, that as long as she stayed with her great-aunt she must fill and brighten his life.

Accordingly, she spent in the garden every hour she could get away from her aunt's house. Her aunt chanced to be having a much busier time than she had foreseen when she invited her niece to stay with her; and, greatly to Michael's profit and joy, the Lady Noggs spent most of her days and a good many evenings in the garden. Several times also she prolonged the hours by the simple device of hiding in a sooty recess of its murkiest shrubbery from her aunt's maid who came to summon her.

During the fortnight she made many distressing discoveries about Michael's life. She learned that he lived for the most part on bread and dripping.

His aunt's servants imitated his aunt in their neglect of him, and found bread and dripping the easiest meal to prepare for him. He had had no new clothes for two years; he had had no pocket-money since Christmas, when his father had sent him a sovereign to buy himself a Christmas present. He had spent some of it on books of adventure; the rest he had spent on relieving the monotony of bread and dripping. He declared that January had been a splendid month. The Lady Noggs was distressed by these discoveries; and she cudgeled her brains how she might relieve his necessities when she had gone back to Stonorill. It seemed to her that she must send him half her pocket-money. If India had not been so far off, she would have written a letter of some severity to his father, pointing out to him his parental duty. In the meantime, since the bread and dripping had made the strongest impression on her, she took him every morning to a confectioner's shop in a neighboring street and treated him to dainties beyond the dreams of gluttony.

In the stimulation of the fuller life Michael grew to be a different boy. He lost his shrinking air; he grew less clumsy and quicker on his feet; some color warmed his cheeks. He began to grow

annoyed with his shabby shrunken clothes and with the fact that four inches of a skinny arm projected beyond either sleeve of his jacket. Continually confronted with the passing daintiness of the Lady Noggs, he began to see to it that those four inches did not present a grimy appearance. Above all, after a day with that active and untiring playmate he often felt a healthy hunger and weariness—sensations strange to him.

But at last the Lady Noggs was to return to Stonorill on the morrow; and on their last evening in the garden he was very sad, and the Lady Noggs could by no means cheer him.

"The garden won't ever be the same without you. It'll be duller than ever it was," he said very gloomily.

"But you know ever so many new games, and you'll be able to play them as you couldn't before, because you didn't know them," the Lady Noggs protested.

"They won't be any fun without you. I shall be more alone than ever. It's worse than when Sarah went," he said.

"But I'm going to write to you, and I didn't do that before."

"What's letters?" said Michael ungratefully.

To the Lady Noggs letters were a great deal; each of them was a very serious and very laborious task, demanding infinite thought and pains. But she saw clearly that letters could be no real assuagement of his loneliness; and once more she began to cudgel her brains for some means of rescuing him once and for all from his distressing plight. Michael watched her with disconsolate eyes.

At last she said slowly: "If you went away, nobody would miss you very much, would they?"

"They wouldn't miss me at all," said Michael, who was inclined to see the world in the blackest colors. "But it's you that's going away—not me."

"Why shouldn't you come with me?" said the Lady Noggs, looking at him earnestly.

Michael sprang to his feet and cried: "What do you mean?"

"Well, I've just thought of your being a foundling and my adopting you, and taking you to live at Stonorill."

"That would be splendid!" cried Michael, his face alight with joyful hope. Then it fell, and he said: "But how could you?"

"It's not so very hard. Greenwood—she's my old nurse, you know—is coming to fetch me tomorrow. She can't really stop me doing anything

I want to—she only fusses. If you meet us at the station I'll say you're a foundling, and make her take a ticket for you to Stonorill."

"It would be splendid," said Michael in a hushed voice; and his eyes were starting out of his head in an excited appreciation of her idea.

"But it's no good your going and then being sent back; and it's so difficult to do these things without telling stories. Sometimes I think it's a pity one mayn't tell stories when it makes it easier to do something that is really all right. But, of course, one mayn't."

"No, of course not," said Michael.

"Your aunt is sure to put your name in the papers; and then they'll know who you are—at least, Billy will. It's a pity he's staying at Stonorill now, being uncle's secretary again, though I do like him very much. But I tell you what, we can say your name is Michael Stanhope. It is your name—only not all of it. So it's true; and there won't be any story in that."

"No," said Michael.

"And we can say that you haven't got a home. For you haven't really, you know. A place where they never take any notice of you, and don't know whether you're in or not, isn't really home."

"No, it isn't," said Michael firmly.

"And I tell you what, you promise me that if uncle, or Billy, or any one asks you where you came from you won't tell them?"

"Yes, I'll promise that," said Michael quickly.

"And I promise not to tell if they ask me; so now neither of us can. And I don't see how they can find out from any one else; Greenwood won't know, and auntie doesn't know anything about you," said the Lady Noggs triumphantly.

"No, I don't see, either," said Michael, and he added proudly: "I say, it'll be a real adventure."

"Yes, won't it? And it's so nice having got it arranged that we can't tell any stories about it. It makes it so much easier to be telling the truth all the time and not making up things. All the same, I'm afraid of Billy's finding out," she added thoughtfully. "He does get round you so, and you tell him things before you know what you're doing."

"I shall be very careful of him," said Michael, with a touch of hostility in his tone.

"You'll have to be," said the Lady Noggs.

With that she set about giving him full instructions how to get to the station next morning to catch the train, and when he was primed she gave him half a crown to pay for his cab.

Michael walked to his aunt's house, such is the refining influence of feminine companionship, with the assured step of a daring adventurer. He set about packing his scanty treasures; and after some consideration, and in something of a vengeful temper, he packed them in his aunt's prettiest hand-bag. He was long getting to sleep, and was up with the dawn. He found the hours to the time of starting interminable. Twice he raided the larder, and made a hearty but cold breakfast.

The Lady Noggs and Mrs. Greenwood, a comfortable, easy-going personage with a considerable figure, arrived ten minutes before the train started; and they were no sooner out of their cab than Michael, who had been scared by the crowd and bustle, hurried up to them. The Lady Noggs shook hands with him and said: "Oh, Greenwood, this is Michael Stanhope. He's a foundling I have adopted. Take a ticket to Stonorill for him."

"Goodness gracious! Whatever does your ladyship mean? Whatever will your uncle say?" cried Greenwood.

"Come along, and take the tickets," said the Lady Noggs coldly, and she led the way to the booking-office.

Mrs. Greenwood, suddenly face to face with the necessity of action, grew red-faced and flustered and fuming, but her little charge said, with cold monotonous repetition: "I'm not going without him. We shall miss the train if you're not quick."

At the last moment Mrs. Greenwood's resistance collapsed; she took the tickets tearfully, and they caught the train. She beguiled their passage through the suburbs with a long jeremiad on the hardness of the lot which made her the guardian of such a wilful child.

As soon as the train came into the country the delight of Michael knew no bounds. He lost none of the country sights, and was, above all, impressed by the extreme greenness of the vegetation after that of Grimestone Square. He found, however, the cows and sheep rather smaller than his remembrance of those beasts. Mrs. Greenwood's well-stocked luncheon-basket was a revelation to him. The drive through the lanes to Stonorill was again a delight, but he found the grandeur of the castle itself somewhat oppressive.

He followed his protector through its loftly portal with considerable timidity; and she, pursuing her usual engaging course of taking the bull by

the horns, led the way straight to the library, where her uncle was working with Mr. Borrodaile.

She opened the door, walked straight across the room to her uncle, kissed him, and said: "I've come back, uncle; and this is Michael Stanhope. He's got no home, and I've adopted him."

The Prime Minister stared at Michael with an intentness which would have misled any one ignorant of his wide experience into the belief that never before had his eyes rested on a small boy. He gasped and said faintly: "He—he's got no home? You—you've adopted him?"

"Yes; I found him in London. He hasn't got a home."

"Dear, dear! This is very astonishing!" said the Prime Minister, staring at Michael in deep consternation.

"And where have you been living, Michael?" said Mr. Borrodaile with creditable promptitude.

"That's a secret. I've promised not to tell," said Michael timidly.

"And a promise is a promise, and he can't break it," said the Lady Noggs firmly. "And we're very hungry and thirsty after our journey, and want our tea."

Mr. Borrodaile looked at the Prime Minister and

shook his head; the Lady Noggs led Michael out of the room.

"It's better to get things over," she said sagely when she had shut the door; and she led Michael up-stairs to her own suite of rooms.

"There's nothing to be done but wait a few days for the advertisement of the people who have lost the boy," said Mr. Borrodaile, and he turned to his work. The Prime Minister groaned, and presently followed his example.

For the next few days the word "splendid" was frequent on Michael's tongue; he had, as the phrase runs, the time of his life, playing with the Lady Noggs in the Stonorill gardens and the Stonorill woods. But he had chosen an unfortunate time for a prolonged stay, since at the very moment of his evasion his father was already nearing England on his return from India, a fact of which his aunt had forgotten to inform him. The day after his evasion she bade her maid find him, that she might take him out to replenish his wardrobe against her brother-in-law's coming. Her irritation at the difficulty of finding him changed to the liveliest dismay when it became clear that he had gone. She informed the police at once, but they could find no trace of him. Four days later her brother-in-law came; and when

he learned of his child's disappearance he gave her further cause for annoyance. But he took up the search himself, vigorously, with the result that when Michael had been at Stonorill a week Mr. Borrodaile found in his morning paper the paragraph for which he had been looking. It told of the strange disappearance of the little son of Mr. Stanhope Broome, an Indian civilian, from a house in Grimestone Square.

Mr. Borrodaile sat down to write to Michael's aunt with a grim smile on his pleasant face. He had gathered from the children a good deal more of Michael's lonely and neglected life than they ever dreamed they had revealed. His letter ran:

"DEAR MADAM—I fancy that your little nephew has found his way here. If you think there is any chance of your knowing him by sight, you had better come and see if it is he. But perhaps it would save trouble if you brought one of your servants with you to identify him. They seem to have been the only persons who ever saw anything of him.

"Yours faithfully,

"W. BORRODAILE."

He smiled again to himself as he read it over, for he foresaw that it would lead to a severe conversation between himself and a deeply but properly injured lady.

Michael's aunt, in her flighty way, read but the first line of the letter, then tossed it across the breakfast table to his father. Then she was called on to explain. It proved not only difficult, but also painful. She was less hurt, however, by her brother-in-law's reproaches than by his firm resolve not to resent the insulting letter and assault Mr. Borrodaile. The explanation ended in his saying that, after all, it might not be Michael, and she had better come down to Stonorill with him to make sure. She tried vigorously but in vain to escape from the expedition. Her brother-in-law, by the exhibition of a very disagreeable firmness, compelled her to accompany him.

It came about, therefore, that, instead of a conversation with a deeply and properly injured lady, Mr. Borrodaile enjoyed a conversation with a gentleman apologizing. Mr. Stanhope Broome, unfortunately, took all the blame for the loneliness and neglect of Michael on himself, so that Mr. Borrodaile had to leave unsaid the few wholesome words he was itching to say to the scowling but beautifully dressed lady. When Mr. Broome had finished making his excuses, Mr. Borrodaile explained the part played by the Lady Noggs in the business, and then

led them through the gardens in search of the lost boy.

They came on the children with some suddenness. Michael was the first to see them, and sprang to the side of the Lady Noggs, crying in all the accents of horror: "Here's my aunt!"

The Lady Noggs stepped in front of him with something of the air of a lioness protecting her whelps, and said truculently: "What do you want? I thought you'd be interfering like this, Billy! And I think it's beastly of you!"

"Let me introduce you. Mr. Stanhope Broome —Lady Grandison," said Mr. Borrodaile hastily, and he effaced himself.

"Why, it's my father!" cried Michael in a tone of no great joy.

"I don't care whether you're his father or not. I've adopted him, and I'm going to keep him," said the Lady Noggs to Mr. Broome with uncompromising decision. "I look after him, and you don't."

"That's very true," said Mr. Broome somewhat sadly. "And I can't express my obligation to you for helping Michael and bringing this state of things to light. But for you he might have gone on living in that wretched way. I might have gone back to India without learning anything about it"—his sis-

ter-in-law walked down the path with a very stiff neck, raising her head high in the air—" and he might have had years more of it. I don't know how to thank you. "

The face of the Lady Noggs softened from its fierceness. " There isn't any need to thank me. I'm very glad I found him and adopted him," she said in a more gentle voice. " But you're not going to take him away? "

" I'm afraid I must. He's trespassed on your uncle's hospitality long enough."

" There's no need to bother about that. Uncle's forgotten he's here," said the Lady Noggs cheerfully.

" And I do so want to stay," said Michael, and his face grew brighter.

Mr. Broome winced. " But what about me? " he said. " I haven't seen anything of him for three years. I have been lonely, too, you know."

The Lady Noggs looked at him with very serious searching eyes; and his face seemed to find favor with her, for she said slowly: " I hadn't thought of that. Perhaps you do want him, really want him more than I do. But, you know, his aunt "—she lowered her voice that that distant lady might not hear—" isn't at all satisfactory; she isn't really."

"I have realized that," said Mr. Broome with an equal seriousness. "And I *do* want Michael. I have no one else; and I've come all the way from India to see him and be with him."

"And you'll really look after him, and see that he isn't left all alone, and gets proper things to eat?" said the Lady Noggs seriously.

"I will indeed; I'm going to take him off to the sea at once, to put some more color into his cheeks."

"It'll be a sad loss," said the Lady Noggs with a deep sigh. "But I suppose you'll have to have him. You don't mind going, do you, Michael?"

Michael, who had watched and listened to them with very earnest eyes as they talked, drew himself up with an heroic air, and blinking away the rising tears, said bravely: "Not very much, Noggs."

CHAPTER II

THE STIFFGATE BULL

IT WAS some ten days before the Prime Minister had any reason to suspect that if Mr. Broome had gained by the recovery of Michael, Stonorill had lost by his departure. He had kept the Lady Noggs busied with amusements of a kind which infringed no one's rights and brought no one discomfort. Left to herself she was hard put to it to fill the hours; and her ingenious mind was apt to find ways of filling them which her elders could regard with neither equanimity nor approbation. She was suffering, too, from a dim sense that fortune had been unkind to her in robbing her of the playmate she had so honorably acquired; and a letter, which taxed all Mr. Borrodaile's skill to decipher, from Michael at Margate, assuring her that he was having a splendid time, did not appease her.

But the Prime Minister was, for the most part, kept by those around him in happy ignorance of the more strenuous portions of his niece's life; and

it was not till the tenth morning after the departure of Michael that she came late to breakfast, to perceive on her uncle's face the expression of unhappy perplexity, so well known to her, which the revelation of some misdeed of hers always spread over it.

The instant she perceived it she plunged firmly into talk about the quite impersonal matter of the weather.

The Prime Minister gave but a half-hearted attention to her prophecies and suggestions about the atmospheric phenomena of the next ten hours, but she went firmly on till lack of breath gave her pause. Forthwith he seized his chance, and said:

"I am very much displeased, Felicia, by a letter I have received about you from Colonel Stiffgate——"

"From that horrid old fat man?" cried the Lady Noggs.

The look of pain on the Prime Minister's face grew acute; and in the shock to his delicate sensibilities he lost the thread of the reproachful discourse he had thought out.

"How many times am I to tell you, Felicia, that I will not have you call your elders names?" he almost wailed.

"Well, he is—and I always forget," said the

Lady Noggs, repeating the offense and apologizing in the same breath.

The Prime Minister gazed at her almost tearfully, and with a bitter sigh took up a letter which lay by his plate, and said:

"He says that his keepers are always complaining that you disturb the nesting pheasants by wandering through his coverts, picking flowers and bird's-nesting."

"Oh, the wicked story-teller!" cried the Lady Noggs; and the flush of righteous indignation which the Prime Minister knew and dreaded warmed her vivid face to a finer glow. "I never bird's-nest. I haven't taken an egg for years and years! I wouldn't! It's just like that fat—that old man to say that I did!"

The Prime Minister looked at her helplessly, for he knew that if any one left the Lady Noggs a loophole she would wriggle through it.

"The point is," he said weakly, "that by wandering through Colonel Stiffgate's coverts you disturb his pheasants."

"That isn't bird's-nesting," said the Lady Noggs, clinging to her point of vantage with an effective feminine pertinacity. "It's cruel; and I wouldn't do it," she added virtuously.

The Prime Minister's sigh was nearly a groan.

"He says that he's forbidden you to trespass on his land several times."

"He's always forbidding me! He doesn't seem to have anything else to do," interjected the Lady Noggs scornfully.

"And he warns me that for the future you will do so entirely at your own risk," the Prime Minister went on without heeding her. "I don't quite understand what he means to do, but he seems to have something disagreeable in his mind. Therefore I forbid you to trespass in his coverts any more. Remember now—I forbid you."

"I don't want to go into his stupid old coverts," said the Lady Noggs. "But all the same, he's a wicked story-teller to say I take birds' eggs."

And for the rest of breakfast she kept up a hearty but subdued grumbling at the injustice that had been done her; and, generally so indulgent to her uncle's absent-mindedness, she was positively harsh to him for eating the chop he had let grow cold.

The feud between Lady Noggs and Stiffgate, of Stiffgate, had not been, strangely enough, of her beginning. When he had been recalled from South Africa, where, like many cherished officers, he had made a brilliant and exhaustive display of all the

possible varieties of incompetence and stupidity, he had returned with a very sore head. It was his firm conviction, very natural in a man so amply endowed with fat around and inside the skull, that none of the losses of his depleted regiment, brought about by his blundering, had been his fault. He could not, indeed, for the life of him have told you where the blame lay—he was only sure that it did not lie with him; and he had left no stone unturned, and he could turn a good many, to get himself reinstated in his command. Unfortunately for him, but fortunately for his regiment, he had hit against the government possessed by a settled conviction, but his efforts had been fruitless. The Prime Minister had been almost short with those of his colleagues who had been blandished or bullied by ladies who enjoyed the gallant warrior's friendship, into advocating the reinstatement. When then Colonel Stiffgate found the Prime Minister's niece gathering cowslips on his side of the boundary brook between Stiffgate and Stonorill he had driven her across to her uncle's land with contumely.

His abuse had rankled and rankled in the heart of the Lady Noggs till the sight of any part of his land at once inspired into her the keenest desire forthwith to trespass on it. This desire she never

balked; and the gamekeeper complained that she disturbed the game; the shepherds complained that she left gates open, and that the sheep and cattle strayed. Whenever Stiffgate, of Stiffgate, met her he threatened her with condign punishment, and she laughed at him. He would have prosecuted her, such was his sense of humor, had she not been so warm a favorite with the county, because the talk afforded by her misdoings was an alleviation of the not infrequent dulness that tarnished its life.

His helplessness against the Lady Noggs began veritably to prey upon his mind, and might actually have ruined that admirable product of ages of civilization had he not at last had a brilliant idea. He put his prize short-horn bull into the field that ran along the boundary brook, put up a board with "Beware of the Bull" painted on it, facing the plank that bridged the brook, wrote his letter of warning to the Prime Minister, and rested assured that the Lady Noggs would trespass no more. He never dreamed that a little girl would disregard the warning on the board.

On the afternoon of the very day on which her uncle had forbidden her trespassing, the Lady Noggs came wandering along the right side of the brook, and paused at the plank that bridged it, with the

keenest desire to pursue her usual trespassing course, and a wistful regret that she might not visit a nest of young sedge-warblers on the Stiffgate side in whom she took a keen interest.

Of a sudden it struck her that her uncle's prohibition only applied to the Stiffgate coverts, not to the Stiffgate fields; her wistful eyes brightened to their wonted brilliance; she heaved a happy sigh, and with an air of radiant content she crossed the plank. On the other side she was confronted by the newly set-up board and its legend. She looked about the field, saw no bull, smiled at the warning in the superior fashion of one too acute to be deceived by such a simple ruse, and pursued her way. She went to the nest, and had taken her fill of the pleasure afforded her by the gaping throats of the hungry fledglings when she heard a snort. She looked up to see a red bull trotting toward her.

Her innumerable scrapes had gifted her with a quickness of wit beyond her years; she was but a moment grasping the facts that the bull was too near the plank for her to reach it before he did, that if she ran across the field he would certainly overtake her, and that the brook was too deep for her to scramble across. Then she bolted for a may tree some forty yards away, and looking over her shoul-

der, saw that at the sight of her flight the bull had broken into a tearing gallop. Under the spur of terror she swarmed and scrambled somehow, anyhow, up the slender trunk, tearing great holes in her frock and stockings, got a grip on a lower branch, and hauled herself up as the bull with a vicious snort dashed underneath it. He stopped his rush thirty yards away, and trotting back, walked round the tree, and then stood still, looking up at her with very wicked little eyes.

"You beast!" said the Lady Noggs with real feeling.

The bull grunted and jabbed his horn at the bark of the trunk a foot below her dangling feet.

When the Lady Noggs got her breath and recovered from her fright, she picked the thorns out of her arms and legs, and broke off their boughs others which were pricking her back. This done, she had the leisure to grow angry, and abused the bull and its owner to the extreme limit of her vocabulary. It was relieving, but it did not mend matters. The gate into the road at the top of the field was a good sixty yards away, the plank over the brook more than eighty; while the horns of the bull were within four feet of her, and seemed likely to stay there.

He stood for a long while looking up at her,

savage and lowering, switching his tail at the flies. She made herself as comfortable as possible, which is not saying much, and waited with what patience she might. After some twenty minutes the bull seemed to turn drowsy, his eyes blinked a while, and then they shut. But she had only to move, and they were watching her, as wicked as ever. Again she whiled away the time by calling him names; it was but a poor sport.

At last she heard afar off the hoot of a motor horn, and scrambled into a position from which she could get a better view of the road. Presently her eager eyes were delighted by the sight of her uncle and the ingenious Mr. Borrodaile, driving along the road, at the end of the field. Fortunately the car was going at a strangely moderate pace for a quiet country lane; but it was a far cry to the Lady Noggs' tree. However, her natural joyousness and ordinary avocations tended to strength of lung; and she raised her voice in a shrill long-drawn cry of "Billee—e! Billee—e!"

To her joy she saw Mr. Borrodaile turn his head, and the sight spurred her to a yet longer and shriller yell of "Billee—e—e!"

This second effort assured Mr. Borrodaile that his ears had not played him false, and he said

quickly to the Prime Minister: "Pull up, sir, please. I hear Lady Grandison calling."

The Prime Minister stopped the car, and they peered over the hedge.

"Billee—e! Billee—e—e!" yelled the Lady Noggs.

"She's in that may tree—stuck, I suppose," said Mr. Borrodaile.

"Do you think so? Dear, dear! this is very distressing! Only this morning I forbade her to trespass in Colonel Stiffgate's coverts," said the Prime Minister.

"Evidently you said his 'coverts'; and she isn't in any of his coverts. She's in one of his fields, as she will point out to you with the most virtuous indignation if you accuse her of having disobeyed you. She has a wonderful grasp of small details of that kind," said Mr. Borrodaile with a grin.

"She must have known that I meant all the Stiffgate land," said the Prime Minister.

"She has a very keen appreciation of accuracy, and you will find that she follows the letter or spirit of any instruction exactly as it suits her; this time it was the letter," said Mr. Borrodaile with another grin, and he got out of the car.

"I never shall follow the working of her mind,"

said the Prime Minister with a deep sigh, and he, too, got out of the car.

They climbed over the gate and walked into the field.

"Mind the bull! Mind the bull!" yelled the Lady Noggs, and on her words the bull trotted out from under the tree into the open.

"Run, sir! Run!" cried Mr. Borrodaile, and, doubtful of his chief's promptitude, he caught his arm, turned him around, and began to haul him along. A bellow from the bull quickened the Prime Minister's wits, and he ran hard for the gate. On the other side of it he said: "Dear, dear! this is very distressing!"

The bull halted in manifest indecision between the tree and the gate.

"I suppose we'd better drive up to Stiffgate, and get the man who looks after the bull to fetch him away," said Mr. Borrodaile.

The Prime Minister gave himself an irritable shake and said:

"I don't want to do that. Stiffgate—well, you know what Stiffgate is. It would serve Felicia right if we left her there till some of his people found her."

"If she'd stay there," said Mr. Borrodaile in a

very doubtful tone. "Patience is hardly her strong point, and the odds are that she'd take some impossible risk, make a bolt for it, and get gored."

"It's very likely. But isn't there any other way of rescuing her without appealing to Stiffgate?"

"Well, if we could get the brute up to the gate and keep him busy she could get safely down to the brook and cross it."

The Prime Minister looked earnestly at the bull, and said: "He seems a very savage animal!"

"He does, indeed," said Mr. Borrodaile.

"Hurry up, Billy. What are you going to do?" came shrilly from the Lady Noggs.

"Patience, my child, patience!" Mr. Borrodaile shouted back.

A confused murmur, shrill and angry, came from the tree, and Mr. Borrodaile chuckled: "My turn for once," he said.

The bull turned and walked back to the Lady Noggs on the principle that a child in a tree is worth two men in a motor-car. Mr. Borrodaile shouted at him, but he took no notice. The Prime Minister shouted to no purpose, Mr. Borrodaile threw stones and the Prime Minister threw stones, in vain; to the bull business was business, and at the moment it was the Lady Noggs. He stood under the tree

and surveyed the cream of British politics gloomily.

"Dear, dear!" said the Prime Minister. "This seems quite useless."

"It is," said Mr. Borrodaile.

The Prime Minister looked this way and that rather helplessly, seeking inspiration. Then he walked firmly to the car, took from it a gaily-colored rug, climbed over the gate, and walked twenty yards into the field.

"Be careful, sir; he's very fast," said Mr. Borrodaile.

The Prime Minister said nothing; he waved the garish rug.

Nothing happened. The bull gazed at him with a gloomy contempt, and the Prime Minister waved the garish rug again.

Nothing happened.

Of a sudden the hot southern ardor of the toreador seemed to surge through the Prime Minister's veins, and he leaped into the air with a blood-curdling yell. The bull tossed his head, and became interested. The Prime Minister leaped and yelled again. Then the full spirit of the arena fired him; waving the garish rug frantically, he leaped and yelled and yelled and leaped, for all the world like a respected witch-doctor of the Upper Congo.

Mr. Borrodaile gazed for a full minute at his chief with an amazed awe; then he began to laugh. From her tree the Lady Noggs gazed at her leaping, yelling uncle with a new, very serious respect.

Suddenly it came home to the thick-witted bull that he was being challenged. With a bellow he bounded out from the tree.

"Look out, sir! He's coming!" shouted Mr. Borrodaile.

The Prime Minister bolted for the gate, got over it in a scrambling tumble, picked himself up, and with unflagging determination resumed his dance and yell. The bull tore up to the gate and danced nervously up and down, bellowing.

It had the sound and appearance of a duet accompanied by a dance; and Mr. Borrodaile got into the tonneau of the car to laugh at his ease. Suddenly the Lady Noggs awoke from her delighted absorption in the spectacle to realize that the coast was clear. She dropped from her tree and bolted for the brook.

She was half-way to it when the Prime Minister's legs and voice gave out together. Taken aback by the sudden cessation of movement and noise, the bull stopped too, gazed blankly around the field, and saw the flying child. With a serene but bovine self-

confidence he set out as hard as he could gallop to catch her when she had a start of a hundred yards in a hundred and forty. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw him coming, and terror spurred her swifter. Then she saw a large stout man running down the side of the brook at right angles to her course to cut her off, roaring as he ran. It was Colonel Stiffgate, who had lunched himself into the true soldierly haziness and forgotten his own bull. He ran with his eyes and mind bent wholly on the Lady Noggs.

She reached the plank forty yards in front of the colonel, sixty yards in front of the bull, ran across it and turned. Her quick eye grasped the fact that Stiffgate, of Stiffgate, had no time to spare, and she shrieked:

"Quick, quick! The bull, the bull!"

Stiffgate's brain was large but slow, and he did not at once grasp the warning. He ran on for a few strides farther before he saw his danger, and stopped short to consider. There was no time for consideration, and the bull was on him. Fortunately, his instincts worked quicker than his wits, and he jumped for it; but unfortunately, the edge of the bank crumbled under his weight, and he landed

full on his broad back in the middle of the stream with a mighty splash.

The Lady Noggs had an excellent view of two huge shooting-boots which waved frantically above the turbid water; then there arose a slimy, weed-wreathed, mud-bedraggled form, surmounted by a massive purple face; and spluttering, snorting and glaring, Stiffgate, of Stiffgate, wallowed heavily through two feet of mud to the bank and stuck, with his hands on it, recovering his breath for the effort to climb it.

The Lady Noggs eyed him coldly for a full minute; then she said: "That will teach you to play with bulls. Who's in the Vaal River now?" turned on her heel and went her way.

The motor-car had already left the gate, and was now exceeding the speed limit.

CHAPTER III

A CAPITULATION

THE Prime Minister had driven the car nearly three miles before he slowed it down and said in a very hoarse voice to Mr. Borrodaile: "I really do not know what I am to do with that child."

"I think it would be safer if you got her another governess," said Mr. Borrodaile. "Mrs. Greenwood is as wax in her hands. Besides, she sees very little of her. Noggs—I mean Felicia—spends most of her time rambling about alone. It's very healthy for her, of course, to be rambling about always; but it does give her every chance of running wild."

"Yes, yes, of course it does. And I've been very neglectful in the matter. I've been meaning to find a new governess for her ever since you carried off Violet. I shall set about it at once. It won't be very easy, I fear."

"No, they're very hard to find good; and a bad one would probably drive Felicia into appalling exercises of her ingenuity," said Mr. Borrodaile

"Yes, I fear that would be so. It is, of course, a great thing for a child to be intelligent; but sometimes I feel that things would be easier if she were a little less intelligent. I have to find a governess who will do justice to Felicia's intelligence, a really good teacher, and at the same time be very firm with her," said the Prime Minister.

"Some one with a good temper and lots of tact," suggested Mr. Borrodaile.

"Tact? Tact? I don't know about that. One must be firm with the young."

Mr. Borrodaile smiled. He had many times seen his chief being firm with the Lady Noggs.

"There are some young with whom it is difficult to be firm," he said, as the car stopped before the steps of the castle.

They saw nothing of the Lady Noggs till tea-time, for it was her custom to have her dinner in the nursery. She came to tea with so gentle and demure an air as to produce the impression—on strangers—that butter, hot though the day was, would not melt in her mouth. She did not, however, shrink at all from mention of her adventure of the morning; in the presence of three county magnates she congratulated her embarrassed uncle warmly on the courage and resource he had dis-

played in the matter of the bull. It was fortunate, indeed, that Mr. Borrodaile was there to keep the incident firmly on the level of the sublime and prevent any intrusion of the ridiculous.

Possibly, however, his little niece's congratulations were one of the reasons why, immediately after tea, her uncle wrote four careful letters to intelligent ladies of his acquaintance on the subject of the best possible governess for her. A week later he went up to London for two days, had interviews with the ladies they presented to him as suitable applicants for the post, and made his choice.

He came to breakfast on the morning after his return with the intention of imparting the coming change in her life to the Lady Noggs, and found the business more difficult than he had expected, owing to the fact that he was afflicted by a strange uneasiness. Little as he was aware of it, none of that uneasiness was lost upon his little niece. She was observing with interest the truly timid fashion in which he kept looking at her. She knew him as only a child knows the elders with which it lives; and she was sure not only that he had something to tell her, but also that he was doubtful how she would take it. She was curious, indeed, to know what it was; but since she gathered from his hesitation that

it was a communication of a doubtful pleasantness, she took no steps to hasten the disclosure. She rather prolonged her usual polite morning inquiries about the condition of the nations.

The answers of the Prime Minister were somewhat obscure owing to a certain absence of mind; then, at last, he pulled himself together, and said hurriedly, and in a rather louder voice than her nearness and the size of the room demanded: "I have some news for you, Felicia; your new governess is coming to-day."

"Oh!" said the Lady Noggs; and she stared at him with astonished eyes. The sudden news was indeed startling.

"Yes, and I hope you will be very fond of her, and that you'll be a good girl and take great pains with your lessons," said the Prime Minister with real fluency now that he had taken the plunge.

"But—but why wasn't I asked about her?" said the Lady Noggs slowly.

"What? How do you mean?" said the Prime Minister.

"I ought to have helped choose her. Then there wouldn't have been so much chance of my not liking her."

"Of course you'll like her. And it is not usual

for little girls to choose their own governesses," said the Prime Minister with some pedantry.

The Lady Noggs frowned thoughtfully and said: "But I'm not a usual little girl. You've told me so, heaps and heaps of times; and you often won't let me do things because I'm not. And if I'm not usual one way, I oughtn't to be usual another; and I ought to help choose my own governess. It's—it's not fair."

Its intimate acquaintance with German philosophy enabled the Prime Minister's accomplished intellect to follow the somewhat obscure reasoning of his little niece, and even to perceive an element of justness in it; but with no abatement of his pedantry he said: "In these serious matters, Felicia, you must let your elders judge for you."

The expression on the face of the Lady Noggs did not show any fervid admiration of the judgment of her elders, and she opened her mouth to inform her uncle of this lack in her nature, thought better of it, and only said: "I don't expect I shall like her much."

"Oh, yes, you will, you'll be very fond of her," said the Prime Minister, complacently stroking his beard, since his celibacy prevented his recognizing the declaration of war.

The Lady Noggs said no more, but she looked forward to the coming of her new governess with an unfortunate sense of injury which promised ill for their relations.

Miss Gladys Stetson, the lady in question, esteemed herself very fortunate to have obtained the post. She owed it to two accidents. The first that she had taught Lady Gaunt's little daughter while she was down at Margate recovering from an attack of scarlet fever, and had received a glowing testimony from Lady Gaunt. The second was that the Prime Minister, during his scrupulous examination of the candidates for the post, had learned from her that she had studied carefully the German scientific methods of teaching. Thanks to his study of philosophy, he could never hear the word German, save when it was attached to the word emperor, without a thrill of pleasurable emotion. This qualification outweighed even her excellent certificates, and he appointed her to the post.

There was wild joy at 19 Pringle Terrace, Margate, Miss Stetson's home, at her good fortune. Both she and her family were exceedingly pleased by the idea of her teaching a peeress; and her nearer relatives, shining with a reflected social glory, spread these great tidings without delay among the

more distant branches of the family. For her part, her joy in her success chiefly arose from the fact that the undreamed-of magnificence of her salary would enable her to relieve the continuously strained family income by taking upon herself the cost of the education of her youngest brother Harold.

She came to Stonorill burning with the honorable resolve to turn out the Lady Noggs such a peeress as never was on sea or land; and she came to her first interview with her full of confidence in her power to compass that desirable end. She had surpassed all the girls of her high school in many examinations, and felt herself fully equipped for the task.

The Lady Noggs, however, came to the interview with an extreme distrust of her new governess' equipment. Since that morning her uncle's neglect to consult her had had time to swell to the proportions of a considerable grievance. Prepared to be displeased, she began by finding this new governess' appearance distasteful. Miss Stetson was a tall, fair, lanky girl, with an amiable face and a retiring chin. The Lady Noggs found her awkward in her movements; she found her voice high; and she fancied that she was given to a too lavish use of it. All the while she was comparing her with her pre-

decessor, Miss Caldecott, now Mrs. Borrodaile, who was not only pretty and charming, but also of the most delightful manners. She had quite made up her mind that she would not get on with her long before the Prime Minister, who was dwelling at some length on the beauty of the relation between pupil and teacher, left them together.

When the door closed behind him Miss Stetson turned to her and cried: "Oh, you beautiful darling! What a glorious delight it will be to teach you!" And rising from her chair, she advanced upon her to embrace her.

The Lady Noggs' soul rose in revolt against this outburst, and with great quickness she put a table between herself and her governess. Miss Stetson stopped to take up the thread of the Prime Minister's discourse, and was eloquent at some length on the beauty of the relation between pupil and teacher. The Lady Noggs, who found that she took far too much for granted, heard her with a growing distaste.

Miss Stetson ended by saying: "I must kiss you! I must, really!"

The Lady Noggs made hastily for the door, said, "I don't like kissing," and vanished.

Miss Stetson was somewhat taken aback by this

abruptness, but her breezy self-confidence very soon assured her that only a natural shyness had caused her pupil's flight, a shyness that would presently yield to her own expansive warm-heartedness. She was wrong. First impressions are especially strong in children, and the distaste the Lady Noggs had, at first sight, taken to her rather waxed than waned. She was annoyed, too, that she had to maintain a perpetual, painful wariness in her society since, without any premonitory symptoms, Miss Stetson might at any moment be seized by a fit of gushing expansiveness, and fling herself upon her and kiss her. For the most part she contrived to get the kiss imprinted on her insensitive hair; but now and again her governess got one in on her shrinking cheek. Also, she came to hate being called "beautiful darling!" Sometimes it made her grind her teeth, sometimes it sent a wave of revolt surging through her veins.

In vain she assured Miss Stetson that she hated kissing. In her next expansive fit her governess would forget this curious and inexplicable dislike, or she would say with a pained air: "Darling, I must have some one to love."

At last, after the second successful kiss in one morning, the Lady Noggs with a very resolute air

pulled a not immoderately clean handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her cheek.

Miss Stetson looked amazed, then hurt; her eyes filled with tears, and she said: "Oh, darling! how can you be so cold-hearted?"

"Yours are such wet kisses," said the Lady Noggs with irritated frankness.

Miss Stetson tried to seem more hurt than offended. She did not succeed; and a coldness ensued very grateful to the chafed spirit of her pupil.

Very soon, too, the Lady Noggs found her lessons a weariness to the spirit. The German scientific method of teaching, whatever its intrinsic excellence, proved, as it filtered through the temperament of Miss Stetson, an unqualified failure. Miss Caldecott had made some lessons, such as English history —in her hands a procession of men and women who did interesting things—entertaining, and so had tided her pupil over less interesting work. In the more conscientious hands of Miss Stetson, who began it all over again, early English history became the provisions of the Magna Charta and the Constitutions of Clarendon. The Lady Noggs could not get her attention fixed on those ordinances; she could never remember anything about them, and she cared less. Naturally, she found other subjects

even duller and more unprofitable. She had never advanced beyond an impatient endurance of lessons, now she began to loathe them.

The first fruits of this loathing were a series of questions to the Prime Minister at breakfast. The formula was always the same: What is the use of (1) history, (2) geography, (3) fractions, (4) grammar, (5) the French irregular verbs? She listened patiently to his explanations of their uses, and said but little in disparagement. Then one morning, after he had pronounced a eulogy on the mentally strengthening effect of the French irregular verbs, she summed the matter up, saying: "But all these things aren't any use to girls. They're only useful to boys when they're grown up—except grammar, and that's no use at all. Nobody uses it."

"There is a great deal of slang in use, I'm sorry to say," said the Prime Minister. "But that is no reason why we should use it."

"Everybody does, and it's just as good—really, don't you think?" said the Lady Noggs.

"No, I don't use slang, and I do not wish you to use it," said the Prime Minister with some tartness. He had found it rather a strain to be called on to defend elementary education so early in the day,

and was even annoyed to find that his defense of it lacked conviction.

"I never use it when I think. But sometimes I forget," said the Lady Noggs in the most virtuous tone.

She had, however, realized even more clearly than her uncle the weakness of his defense, and had already made up her mind that her life should no longer be burdened by such trivialities.

Accordingly, when Miss Stetson came, breezy and beaming and full of zeal for the Constitutions of Clarendon, into the schoolroom at ten o'clock, she did not find her pupil awaiting her. A quarter of an hour, twenty minutes passed, and still she did not come. Miss Stetson felt keenly the despite done to the German scientific method of teaching, in which very properly great importance is attached to the punctuality of the pupil. She rose and went out to find her. She was unsuccessful. The only servant —and in the course of half an hour she had made inquiries of a dozen—who had seen the Lady Noggs was a gardener; and he had seen her an hour or more ago wending her way through the shrubberies to the home wood. To the home wood Miss Stetson went. At the far end of it she met Morton, the head gamekeeper.

In answer to her question he said, with some asperity: "Seed her? Yes, I seed her—over to Barton's spinney, disturbing of my pheasants."

"Dear, dear! I'm sorry to hear that. I hope you pointed out the harm she is doing."

"I didn't do nothing of the kind. She'd only have cheeked me if I'd ha' said anything," said Morton gloomily. He was no friend of the Lady Noggs, with whom he had had his differences.

"You don't say so?" said Miss Stetson with a shocked air.

"But I do say so. And wot I say is that them as has the looking arter her ought ter learn her different," said Morton with meaning, and he went his way.

Miss Stetson set out for Barton's spinney, and long before she reached it she was wishing heartily that she had a pupil of a less active habit. She called and she hunted all about the wood, but there was no sound or sight of the truant. At last she abandoned the search and went back to the castle. She came into the schoolroom weary and hot to find the Lady Noggs the picture of fresh coolness, sitting at the table; and round her lay several sheets of paper covered with figures.

The Lady Noggs looked up at her and said in

honeyed tones: "I've been working all by myself for hours. And I've done lots and lots of fractions, but I think they're all wrong."

Miss Stetson sat down heavily and gasped.

"But—but—I waited for you till twenty past ten!" she said. "And I've been hunting in the woods for you—everywhere!"

The Lady Noggs did not think fit to tell her that she had come back from the woods at half past ten, had watched her, from a shrubbery, leave the castle, and at once slipped up to the schoolroom. She only said: "Yes, I was rather late. I didn't take my watch with me."

There was no provision against such a simple oversight in the German scientific method of education, and Miss Stetson groaned. She neither addressed her pupil as a "beautiful darling" during the rest of that day, nor did she offer once to kiss her, and her pupil did not fail to observe these grateful omissions.

She pondered them, with the result that when next morning Miss Stetson gushed into the schoolroom and said, "Good morning, beautiful darling," the Lady Noggs upset the inkpot thoroughly.

No affection gushed from Miss Stetson for more than an hour. Then "beautiful darling" slipped

out again, and the Lady Noggs fell vigorously off her chair, dragging at the table-cloth, and half her books fell with her. Miss Stetson saved the inkpot, but the strain on her presence of mind fluttered her badly. For a long while she was too much shaken to gush; then, during the last quarter of an hour, she said to her pupil, who was busy with her copy-book: "How are you getting on, beautiful darling?"

There was a horrid scrunch as her pupil's nib bit deep into the page and broke, after spurting its ink over the clean copy.

"Oh, dear! Another page spoiled!" cried Miss Stetson.

"Do you know," said the Lady Noggs slowly, "I think it's unlucky to call me 'beautiful darling.' Something always seems to happen when you do." And she looked at Miss Stetson with the limpid eyes of extreme innocence.

Miss Stetson gazed at her blankly for a few seconds; then her face filled with horrified understanding, and she said coldly: "I'm afraid, Felicia, yours is not an affectionate disposition."

The Lady Noggs could not follow her reasoning. She knitted her brow in the effort, and said with

some hesitation: "Well, I suppose it isn't—not like that. But I'm very fond of dogs."

Miss Stetson found the utterance cryptic.

For some days there was peace. Miss Stetson no longer called her pupil "beautiful darling." The Lady Noggs was, however, much bored by the dulness of her lessons, and cheered by her first success, she began to dream dreams. It began to seem possible to disembarrass herself of the German scientific method of education, perhaps even of its affectionate exponent.

Then a series of mischances occurred. One day the English history was lost, and till another could be sent from London there was a respite from the Constitutions of Clarendon. Then the arithmetic disappeared for two days; then it was found on the floor under Miss Stetson's bed. Her pupil asked if Miss Stetson had fallen asleep reading it and forgotten it; but Miss Stetson rejected the suggestion with an asperity that made the Lady Noggs say in an injured tone: "I thought you liked arithmetic."

Miss Stetson looked at her a little wildly.

Pens would never stay in the schoolroom—at any rate, in sight. They were found in strange places for pens to be. Once Miss Stetson said, with cold

severity: "Did you hide that pen behind the bookcase, Felicia?"

"Oh, no!" cried the Lady Noggs in almost anguished denial. "I only threw it to see where it would go. And that was where it went."

"And what did you throw it for?" said Miss Stetson.

The Lady Noggs considered a little; then she said: "It must have been scientific curiosity. You told me that scientific curiosity was splendid, not like the inquisitive kind."

It was sayings of this kind that shook Miss Stetson's conviction of her pupil's dulness.

The ink, too, acquired strange habits. One day it would be but a hard black coating at the bottom of the inkpot. The Lady Noggs had discovered that this effect could be produced by baking it, surreptitiously, in an oven for a couple of hours. Another day it would be a pale watery fluid. It would collect, too, incongruous objects—a hairpin and bread-crumbs and bits of fluff, for example. Indeed, whenever she saw anything small for which the world had no particular use, the Lady Noggs would put it in the inkpot. It is perhaps needless to say that the points were always broken off the

On two days out of three, again, the Lady Noggs came to her lessons from half an hour to an hour late. On the third day she presented a stern intellectual impenetrability to the infiltration of any kind of knowledge, an impenetrability against which no strenuousness of her governess was of any avail. Miss Stetson began to understand that knowledge is but a small part of the teacher's equipment, and to fear that the German scientific method of education might not be universally applicable.

Possibly the most irritating thing of all was the unvarying, amiable politeness of the Lady Noggs. She never sulked, she was never impertinent. She never dreamed of denying the commission of a misdeed; when taxed with it, she admitted it with a suave serenity. She listened to Miss Stetson's rebukes and reproaches with an apparently unruffled mind, she was never at a loss for a simple excuse of the most annoying kind. Save in the matter of unpunctuality she was never even guilty of direct disobedience; but she could think of a myriad of misdemeanors which Miss Stetson could not, and committed them before an ordinance against them could be issued. In this matter her mind showed a truly surprising fertility of invention. Out of school she

maintained a settled cold aloofness which fairly wrung Miss Stetson's affectionate heart.

However, Miss Stetson struggled and struggled on, to the great improvement of her character, against increasing difficulties; but each week the German scientific method of education seemed to grow less and less effective in this particular case. She was loath to appeal to the Prime Minister, for she rightly thought that the cares of the British Empire were enough for him, and that he ought not to be bothered in addition with the contumacy of his niece. But at last she found herself so helpless in the matter of that contumacy that no other course seemed open to her. She warned the Lady Noggs, who seemed strangely unmoved by the prospect of her uncle's displeasure, and then she told him.

"Dear, dear, this is very distressing!" cried the Prime Minister, clutching at his beard. "I shall speak seriously to her at once. Will you send her to me, please?"

Generally the Lady Noggs came to these scoldings haughtily defiant; to this one she came with an air of placid resignation.

She found her uncle in a quite definite frame of mind very rare in him; and he said at once, in a tone of uncompromising severity: "Miss Stetson tells

me, Felicia, that you are doing your lessons in a most unsatisfactory way."

"They're such stupid lessons," said the Lady Noggs.

"Nonsense!" said the Prime Minister. "It is you who are a stupid little girl."

"But they are stupid," said the Lady Noggs with gentle firmness. "I can't learn such stupid things. They won't stick in my memory. I know they won't. I've found it out."

"You don't try," said the Prime Minister.

"Not now; but I did try at first, and it wasn't any use," said the Lady Noggs with unabated firmness.

There was an appearance of reasonableness in the attitude of his niece, and the scrupulous soul of the Prime Minister was at once shaken. He lost his air of severity, betook himself to reasoning, and said: "But you don't want to grow up an ignorant woman. Think how disgraceful it would be, especially in your position. No one has a right to waste their opportunities; above all, you haven't, since you will be called on to set an example."

"I don't want to know fractions, or constitutions, or French irregular verbs. I don't think that's ignorance; no one does, except governesses," said the Lady Noggs, still firm.

"But how do you expect to speak French if you do not know the irregular verbs?" said the Prime Minister.

"I shall use the regular verbs—there's lots and lots of them," said the Lady Noggs with confidence.

The Prime Minister fell back on his first attitude, and said: "You are a very foolish little girl, Felicia. You are not capable of judging for yourself in these matters; you must follow the judgment of your elders. Don't let me hear again that you have been neglecting your work, or—or—I shall have to punish you severely."

The Lady Noggs took it that she was dismissed; she smiled an amiable smile upon her uncle, and went out of the room, saying: "It's no good, uncle. Those dull things *won't* stick in my head."

His reproaches, however, made this difference: she became punctual in coming to her lessons. But that was all the difference they did make; once in the schoolroom she displayed the same intellectual impenetrability to knowledge. During the first half an hour in the morning she might perhaps learn a little; then the weariness of fractions or of constitutions or of whatever was being Germanly imparted would fall heavily on her, and she began to struggle with her yawns. Then one day she made the happy

discovery that after a certain amount of boredom she could go to sleep. She went to sleep—every day.

At the end of ten days of these peaceful slumbers Miss Stetson had come to utter despair of her. It would perhaps have been more to the point had she come to despair, in this particular case, of the German scientific method of education. But she was a credulous soul; she had heard it well spoken of by the experts she revered; and she never dreamed of examining into its real value. She was then in despair, and she was a quite honest girl. She found herself face to face with the question whether or not she was justified in keeping a post in which she could not do the work. The question harassed her mind for a while, then it was settled. At the end of lessons one morning she realized that the Lady Noggs had learned nothing, that all her efforts to teach her something had been fruitless, that future efforts would also be fruitless, and that she must resign.

The Lady Noggs had lost her excessively somnolent air and left the schoolroom briskly the moment the lessons ended; with such briskness, indeed, had she gone that she left the door unlatched. She ran into her room, put on her hat, and came back

toward the staircase. As she passed the schoolroom door she heard a loud sob and then another. She stopped short, opened the door a little way and peeped in. Miss Stetson still sat in her place at the head of the table, but her face was buried in her hands, and she was sobbing pitifully. The Lady Noggs drew the door to gently, and hurried along to the staircase. Half-way down it her feet began to lag; at the bottom she stopped; then, with an air of extreme discomfort and reluctance, she turned, went up-stairs and into the schoolroom. Miss Stetson was sobbing too violently to be aware of her presence till she touched her arm with a rather shaky hand and said gently: "What's the matter, Miss Stetson?"

Miss Stetson dropped her hands and uncovered a contorted face. She stared at her pupil with wretched eyes and cried: "You're the matter! You hateful, horrid child!"

The Lady Noggs, taken aback by her violence, felt the first faint stirring of respect for her.

"Me? How?" she said.

"You refuse—to learn—anything at all! And I must—go. It—it—wouldn't be honest—to take a salary—for work—I wasn't doing," sobbed Miss

The Lady Noggs' heart leaped at the prospect of release, it sounded too good to be true. Then another wave of pity for her weeping governess swept over her, and she said in her most soothing tone: "I expect the next little girl you teach will be able to learn all sorts of things ever so easily. You—you ought to be glad to get away from any one as slow as me."

"Oh, you! I wasn't thinking about you!" cried Miss Stetson scornfully. Then she broke down again, and sobbed, "It—is—Harold."

"Who's Harold? What's he got to do with it?" said the Lady Noggs in some surprise.

It was a relief to Miss Stetson to unburden her overloaded heart, if only to her enemy, and she sobbed: "He's—he's—my little brother—I—was—paying—for his education."

The Lady Noggs was puzzled. She knitted her brow and said: "But—but the next little girl's people you teach will pay you a salary just the same, won't they?"

"Not a salary like this—I couldn't hope for it—after I've failed with you, too," said Miss Stetson, and she buried her face in her hands and sobbed afresh.

The Lady Noggs' face fell; she began to see her

promised freedom slipping away. She tried to harden her heart, but in the face of Miss Stetson's pitiful anguish she could not.

"I suppose I could learn," she said in a miserable voice. "And I can't let you go if it's like that."

Miss Stetson shook her head.

"But I learned a good deal from Violet—from Miss Caldecott."

"Antiquated—methods," sobbed Miss Stetson.

The Lady Noggs pondered, then she said: "Perhaps they were the right kind for me."

A faint glow of hope illumined Miss Stetson's gloom; she let her hands fall again, and said: "I—I wonder."

"If it weren't all dull together, I could learn. There were lots of stories and—and interesting people in history—the little princes in the tower and Joan of Arc—Miss Caldecott used to teach me about. She got them in between arithmetic and French; and I never went to sleep."

"The pageant of history—it *is* so unscientific," moaned Miss Stetson.

"I don't care. It isn't sleepy like constitutions," said the Lady Noggs firmly but gloomily, seeing that she was destroying all prospect of release.

Miss Stetson leaned back, sobbing more slowly

and more faintly, and thinking. It might be that the methods which worked so well in the case of the happy but phlegmatic German child were unsuited to this spirited pupil. It seemed probable; and if only they were, a way of escape from resignation opened before her. Conscience raised a faint ineffectual protest against the abandonment, but it was drowned in the outcry of hope. She leaned forward with flushed face and shining eyes and said: "Oh, Felicia, do you think we could? Do you think you could learn like that? I would try to make them interesting!"

The Lady Noggs was touched afresh by this outburst; she understood that it was not gush, and she smiled quite kindly at Miss Stetson as she said: "I'm quite sure I could. What's—what's Harold like?"

CHAPTER IV

THE STRENUOUS SECRETARY

THERE was peace at Stonorill. The Lady Noggs was indulgent to Miss Stetson; she had understood that to maintain her governess' conscience in a condition of peace and comfort she had to make some progress in the acquisition of knowledge, and she made it. Truly, it was very little effort to her, and she was teaching Miss Stetson how to teach; and Miss Stetson was cheerfully imparting to her all those irrelevancies with which the modern world so carefully loads the minds of the young in the sacred name of education.

But peace at Stonorill was not wholly to the Lady Noggs' liking. Doubtless, had she been called on to give an opinion on the matter, she would have expressed a theoretical admiration of peace in the home. Practically a little gentle warfare of some kind was better suited to her ardent spirit. It added spice to life.

The Prime Minister, with no will in the world to

do anything of the kind, presently provided her with the diversion she missed. One morning at breakfast he told her that he had engaged a new secretary, and that he was coming to take up his abode at Stonorill that very afternoon.

The Lady Noggs felt that her uncle had made a mistake in not consulting her about the appointment, since she believed that she knew his needs so much better than he knew them himself. But the appointment of a new secretary, unlike the appointment of Miss Stetson, was not really her personal concern, and she only said: "What's his name?"

"His name is Budge, Mr. Millington Budge," said the Prime Minister.

"Budge? It's not a very nice name," said the Lady Noggs. "Is he like it?"

"One should not judge people by their names," said the Prime Minister in the proper didactic vein.

The Lady Noggs paused a while thoughtfully before answering; then she said in a tone the reverse of hopeful: "Well, I hope you'll get on with him, uncle."

"Really, you do say odd things, Felicia. Of course I shall get on with him," said the Prime Minister tartly.

As a matter of fact, her tone harmonized with

the doubts about that process from which the Prime Minister was suffering. There had been a good deal of hypnotism about the appointment of Mr. Millington Budge, and Mr. Millington Budge had done the hypnotizing. Removed from his magnetic and a trifle overwhelming personality, doubts of the wisdom of his choice had worried the Prime Minister with a quiet but untiring persistence. He was not pleased to hear them echoed in the tones of his little niece.

"I didn't mean to say anything odd," said the Lady Noggs peaceably, and she addressed herself to her breakfast.

Though the afternoon was a blaze of sunshine, and the woods inviting, the Lady Noggs came in in time for tea in the drawing-room. The Prime Minister always took his tea in the drawing-room, though it would often have been more convenient to have it brought to the library where he was working, so that she might, if she wished, see something of him at another time besides the breakfast hour. She did not often show any desire to enjoy this pleasure on a fine day; she was out riding, or in the gardens, or the woods; but that afternoon she disregarded the invitation of the sunshine in her keen curiosity to see Mr. Millington Budge.

She put on a pretty frock, and was careful not to go to the drawing-room till the two men were already in it, for, young as she was, with feminine precocity she had a dim inkling of the value of a good entrance.

When she came in the Prime Minister stopped short in his discussion of his new secretary's work; he lost his somewhat harried air, and said, with his charming smile, "So you are honoring us with your presence this afternoon, Felicia? Let me introduce Mr. Millington Budge to you—Mr. Millington Budge, my niece, Lady Grandison."

The Lady Noggs dropped a deep old-fashioned courtesy, an accomplishment she had learned at the express desire of her uncle; Mr. Millington Budge responded by a curt modern nod, and even as he nodded he asked the Prime Minister a question. The eyebrows of the Lady Noggs rose ever so little, and she went to the table to give them their tea. In response to her question whether he took cream or sugar, Mr. Millington Budge nodded again, and with thoughtful care she gave him too much sugar and too little cream. She carried her uncle's tea to him, and brought him the cakes he preferred. Mr. Millington Budge, without pausing in his talk, descended on the tea-table and helped himself. The

Lady Noggs had the opportunity of observing his strong thick-featured face, dull slate-blue eyes, thick lips, large red hands, and square dumpy figure. She thought he looked very like a rock.

With proud contempt, she saw him make a face over his cup of tea just as the Prime Minister said: "I don't know how it is, Felicia, but you always give me the nicest cup of tea I get anywhere."

"Oh, that's very easy," said the Lady Noggs. "I know just how you like it."

A question from Mr. Millington Budge drowned somewhat the end of her sentence, and a little frown clouded her brow. But presently she became absorbed in a wondering awe over his method of eating bread and butter. He set down his cup on the table, and taking slice after slice from the plate, folded each into a neat cube and put it whole into his mouth. She watched him with absorbed interest, and when he had emptied the plate of bread and butter she pushed a plate of fairy cakes toward him. The fairy cakes were larger than the bread and butter cubes, and to her sincere disappointment he broke each in half. He did not even consume all of them, a thoroughness which might again have aroused her interest in him; and as soon as they had finished their tea she slipped out of the room. As

she was closing the door behind her she heard him say for the third time: "You know, Lord Errington, I'm a glutton at work."

The Lady Noggs shook her head, and her face was grave. In the matter of secretaries she had been spoiled by her intimate friend and faithful counselor, Mr. William Borrodaile, and she was distressed to find that Mr. Millington Budge fell so far short of the ideal. Once in the woods, however, she forgot him.

As a rule the Prime Minister was exceedingly careful not to give his little niece any opening, but at breakfast next morning, in the middle of a somewhat anxious consideration of the qualities of his new secretary, he said, with absent-minded thoughtlessness: "Well, Felicia, what did you think of Mr. Budge?"

"I thought he was beastly," said the Lady Noggs with ingenuous frankness.

The Prime Minister awoke wincing, and said in a pained voice: "I wish, Felicia, you would get out of the habit of putting things so strongly!"

"You asked me, and I had to tell the truth," said the Lady Noggs with steely firmness, and with something of the air of one injured.

The Prime Minister realized how unwise he had

been in raising the subject. He said nothing, hoping that it would be allowed to drop. It was a fond hope, for presently the Lady Noggs said, with the air of one who has threshed the matter out: "He won't do for you at all."

"Nonsense! He's a very clever man!" cried the Prime Minister, resenting again the echo of the growing conviction of his innermost heart.

"I don't care. He won't," said the Lady Noggs, unmoved.

Again the Prime Minister tried silence, apparently with success, and breakfast proceeded. His mind had drifted quite away from his new secretary; then the Lady Noggs said:

"I don't believe any one ever called him Dicky, or even Dick."

"Dick? Dicky? Who?" said the Prime Minister, flustered out of his grammar by this sudden introduction of a strange name.

"Mr. Budge—his name is Richard."

"This irrelevance is really rather trying," said the Prime Minister with some irritation; then he added more gently: "But there—I suppose you can't help it. It's only feminine."

"I'm not feminine!" said the Lady Noggs with some heat.

"All females—all girls and women are feminine," said the Prime Minister with conscientious exactitude.

"I'm not," said the Lady Noggs. "And anyhow, if he bothers me at all, I shall call him Dick."

Used rather to grope its way along the tortuous paths of German philosophy, this agile mental flight was too much for the intellect of the Prime Minister, and for the third time he took refuge in silence. But as she left him after breakfast, the Lady Noggs said, with almost truculent emphasis: "You needn't think he'll suit you, uncle, because he won't."

Mr. Millington Budge is best described—as, indeed, he is fond of describing himself—by that admirable adjective "brainy," and he was also pushing and resourceful. The son of an English solicitor of Swansea, he had gone from the grammar school of that town to Cambridge, and there became infected by the political ambition. He had begun his political career as the private secretary of a member for a Welsh county, had risen quickly to be the private secretary of more important politicians, until now he was the private secretary of the Prime Minister himself, on whom he had almost been thrust by the president of the Board of Trade.

In a feverish eagerness to be rid of him, his employers had united in describing him as the possessor of all the solid virtues. He had grown used to being suddenly passed on, but since he had always been passed up as well as on he regarded each passage as a tribute to his excellence, and after each required a hat a size larger.

The Prime Minister soon found that he had described himself with perfect accuracy, as a glutton at work, but that he had omitted all mention of a yet more striking quality, his versatility. He was not only a glutton at work, but a glutton at every kind of work; indeed, to put it idiomatically, he could not see a show of any kind without trying to boss it. He enjoyed, too, an exactly similar attitude toward human beings. The human beings failed to enjoy it. He was not by any means one of those finicking fellows who hide an iron hand under a velvet glove; with a sturdy earnestness in keeping with his rock-like appearance he always strove to trample a straight path to his end of universal rule.

He displayed this earnestness in all its sturdiness at Stonorill. The Prime Minister's correspondence, to the Prime Minister's great disgust, began presently to teem with it; and there seemed no way of keeping it out, since Mr. Millington Budge enjoyed

a mind conscious of rectitude and its own excellence to a degree that enabled him to disregard even the specific instructions of his chief. Some of the papers and many of his supporters began to remark that the Prime Minister was losing that admirable tact which had held together a factious, fractious party, and brought it through so many awkward passes.

Did the Prime Minister protest against this ignoring of his instructions and consequent mess, Mr. Millington Budge protested the absolute purity of his intentions, the fervency of his desire to do the right thing, and the intensity of his conviction that he had done it.

Once or twice the Prime Minister had recourse to sarcasm; it was for all the world as if he had tried to correct a duck by pouring water on its back, or rather, considering the thickness of Mr. Millington Budge's skin, as if he had tried to check the charge of a rhinoceros with dust-shot. At the end of three weeks the exasperated Prime Minister was casting about, vainly, for a method of getting rid of him.

Mr. Millington Budge by no means confined his sturdy earnestness and versatile gluttony for work to politics. He was fast assuming the management of Stonorill Castle and the estate. The timid house-

keeper already took orders from him as from a master; his brisk commands had several times empurpled the faces of the butler and the head gardener beyond the dreams of apoplexy. To Mr. McNaghten, the steward of the estate, he was beginning to assume the proportions of a nightmare.

Always well-meaning, or rather of really brilliant intentions, he was hardly ever fortunate in the results of his interference. One afternoon he found the under gardeners at work making a change in the rose garden which would add to the view from it a glimpse of the White Pool. At once he considered the matter profoundly but hastily, gave orders, with a peremptoriness there was no disobeying, that another part of the hedge should be cut down, and ere the head gardener returned had added to the view a fine prospect of a large bed of well-grown cabbages.

The head gardener and the hastily summoned Prime Minister were annoyed by the result of his energy; but they were even more annoyed by his joyful conviction that the rose garden had been much improved by the fine prospect of a large bed of well-grown cabbages. Indeed, the head gardener, for all his years, left the group at a smart run, lest he should burst all over one of his own beds if he

did not at once reach the distance at which he could express his real feelings about Mr. Millington Budge.

But all might have gone well with Mr. Millington Budge, and he might be at Stonorill still, supreme ruler, had he not in an unfortunate hour learned that the Lady Noggs, whom hitherto he had from his lofty eminence of wisdom and energy utterly ignored, was a peeress in her own right and head of the Grandison family. If there was a weakness in his strenuous character, it was that he loved to bask in the sunshine which irradiates from persons of exalted birth. A nod from a duke would make him happy for a week; and he would have walked cheerfully from London to York for the exquisite delight of hearing a prince bid him good morning, and that though he was not really of a musical temperament. Therefore, though he had ignored the Lady Noggs as a little girl, as a peeress she became the object of his liveliest interest; and it became one of his many missions in life to mold her into a shape befitting the lofty position she would hold.

It need hardly be said that he disapproved at once and heartily of the manner in which she was being brought up. Her freedom from arrogance, in particular, seemed to him almost deplorable, to show

an utter lack of appreciation of the dignity of her rank. He disapproved hardly less of her free, open-air life and of the teaching of Miss Stetson, her governess.

It was contrary alike to his principles and his nature to keep his disapproval to himself. He assailed the Prime Minister, and harrowed his scrupulous soul with objections against his niece being allowed a ruinous freedom; he lectured Miss Stetson on her inefficiency in not giving her pupil a course of political history which should fit her for the position which she must eventually occupy as the wife of a public man. Miss Stetson, who was congratulating herself on the progress her pupil had made since the shelving of the Constitutions of Clarendon, lost her temper, and with the air of an infuriated sheep suggested that he should give her a course of political history himself. Also he scolded Mrs. Greenwood, her nurse, for letting her run wild; and Mrs. Greenwood, as she afterward told the second housemaid, flared up and bade him try to check the Lady Noggs himself.

Then he fell upon the Lady Noggs with a long and even ornate lecture on the behavior befitting a young peeress, and the course of conduct to be followed if she would grow up to adorn her exalted

station. He dwelt at great length on the cultivation and maintenance of personal dignity, and was very scornful of holland frocks.

The Lady Noggs listened to him with a puzzled attention, which grew more and more resentful. Then she said: "Do you mean I'm to wear my coronet in the garden?"

For a moment Mr. Millington Budge was dazzled by a delightful vision of himself walking about the Stonorill gardens beside a peeress in a gleaming coronet; then he said, rather sadly: "Well—er—no. That would be going to extremes."

"Look here, did uncle tell you to give me this jaw?" said the Lady Noggs sternly.

The racy idiom did not at all appeal to the fundamentally correct mind of her mentor, and he said severely: "To talk of the instructions and suggestions of your elders as a jaw is by no means the way in which a child of your great future ought to speak."

"Did uncle tell you to jaw me?" persisted the Lady Noggs, unmoved.

"He did not directly instruct me; but I know he approves of my feeling in the matter. I have discussed——"

"I knew it was just interfering!" cried the Lady

Noggs. "And I won't be interfered with by you. I'm not a rose garden."

Mr. Millington Budge blushed faintly; the word rose garden recalled to his mind a few burning words from the heart of the head gardener on the subject of his intelligence, after the departure of the Prime Minister from the scene of his secretary's improvement had left him free to unburden himself of his opinion. But he said firmly: "You do not understand, but I take a natural interest in you as the niece of my chief."

"I do understand—it's just your interfering way," said the Lady Noggs scornfully.

"You're a very naughty, bad-mannered child!" cried Mr. Millington Budge in a sudden exasperation. "But I mean to take your education and general behavior in hand. They've been neglected too long!"

The Lady Noggs gasped at this enormous arrogance; then she said, very slowly and coldly: "You'd better try—Silly Dick!" turned on her heel and left him.

Mr. Millington Budge could hardly believe his invariably crimson ears; "silly" seemed so preposterous an epithet to apply to him, and "Dick"

seemed as inappropriate a name. He could not think of himself as anything less than Richard.

His self-love was wounded, not very deeply, but deeply enough to make him bestir himself in the matter and work upon the Prime Minister's scrupulous anxiety to do his duty by the Lady Noggs. Soon the Lady Noggs perceived that her uncle regarded her with a worried air; and he began to talk of restrictions. She saw at once that Mr. Millington Budge was influencing him; she became dimly aware that she was engaged in a struggle for liberty; and she grew wary, casting about for some method of signally discomfiting her enemy.

She made no haste about it, rejecting such methods as booby-traps and apple-pie beds as not being severe enough; but she lost no opportunity of discrediting him with her uncle. One morning, coming rather late to breakfast, after greeting the Prime Minister, she said with a somewhat careful airiness: "Why do you look so grumpy, uncle? What's Silly Dick been doing now?"

"Silly Dick?" said the Prime Minister blankly.

"Silly Dick Budge. It always used to be the Emperor Fritz who made you look grumpy. Now it's Silly Dick."

"I will not have you give people these detestable

nicknames, Felicia," said the Prime Minister verely.

The Lady Noggs knitted her brow into a judic impartiality. "It isn't really a nickname—not him," she said with thoughtful gravity. "H really perfectly silly. Everybody says so."

The Prime Minister opened his mouth to prote then his scrupulous desire for exact truthfulness all his dealings with the child caused him to raise coffee-cup hastily to his mouth and put coffee into Then he said: "Mr. Budge—er—er—takes a gr interest in your welfare."

"He's always trying to interfere with son body," said the Lady Noggs with cold ingratitud

The Prime Minister let the matter drop; but t name "Silly Dick" stuck in his mind, as the appr priate will, and he found himself calling his sec tary by it whenever he thought of him. Then began to make him uneasy; far above ridicule as knew a Prime Minister of England to be, he f that it was unwise of him to have ridiculous persc about him. Insensibly it began to weaken the fo of Mr. Millington Budge's exhortations.

Then the thoughts of that earnest fellow w diverted somewhat from the Lady Noggs by t news that the Duchess of Huddersfield, that famc

light of society and politics, was coming to Stonorill for a week; and his mind filled with splendid schemes for impressing her with his strenuous wisdom. The next afternoon he chanced upon the Lady Noggs on her way to the woods, and it struck him that he could not better ingratiate himself with the duchess than by being able to tell her of his successful efforts to improve her grand-niece.

On the instant he barred the way, and said firmly: "Now, Lady Felicia, I see that you're off to the woods again. This gipsying about will *not* do. It's no training for a lady. Come straight back to the house, and occupy yourself quietly, in a ladylike manner, with a book or some fancy work till Mrs. Greenwood can accompany you on a walk in a decorous fashion."

"I shan't!" said the Lady Noggs simply.

"But I insist on it," said Mr. Millington Budge.

"I don't care;" said the Lady Noggs.

"If you don't come, I shall take you," said Mr. Millington Budge, swelling suddenly with a very terrible air.

The eyes of the Lady Noggs flashed; then she said with ineffable contempt and a very sibilant "S": "S-silly Dick!" and darted past him.

Mr. Millington Budge darted after her, and they

pelted down the shrubbery, across the meadow path, and into the wood. Nature had built Mr. Millington Budge to lead, not to follow, especially to follow any one of the speed and endurance of the Lady Noggs. But he had set his boots, the thick boots of an earnest man, to the chase, and he labored after her with a stern doggedness. As they traversed the woods, now and again she cheered him to more enthusiastic efforts by a taunting cry of "Silly Dick!" His superb confidence in himself, his ignorance of the running powers of small girls, and of the fact that the race is not always to the strong, urged him to a perseverance worthy of a more hopeful cause. His abstemious virtues, the fact that he neither smoked nor drank, helped him over the horrible ground which the Lady Noggs' knowledge of the woods enabled her to choose for their excursion. The end of it came suddenly. He blundered knee-deep into a swamp she had skirted; his legs and his lungs gave out together, and for a while he stuck. She returned to the edge of the morass, pointed out in a few incisive words that "Silly Dick" was the only name which really suited him, and went lightly away.

Presently, having got his breath, Mr. Millington Budge extricated himself from the swamp with feel-

ings too deep for words—for any words, that is, in the vocabulary of a man of his respectable past. When he was out of it he found himself quite lost; his guiding star, for that was the function the Lady Noggs had discharged, had disappeared. He was wandering disconsolately about the wood, suffering bitterly from shock to his high opinion of himself, when a grim-looking man in velveteen pounced on him from behind a tree with a peremptory request for his name and address.

Mr. Millington Budge gave them with manifest pride, and said that he had lost his way.

"Lost your way!" said the gamekeeper with scoffing incredulity. "You've been trespassing in pursuit of game, you 'ave. Look at your legs. You may think as it'll 'elp you bein' Lord Errington's private secretary. But it won't. There's no love lost between the master and 'im along of that plague little Lady Grandison. We've bin looking out for to catch one of you Stonorill people this many a day, and now we've caught you."

"But it's preposterous! I've never pursued game in my life! I'm an active member of the Society for the Suppression of Field Sports!" cried Mr. Millington Budge.

"You tell that to the Bench," said the game-



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keeper with perfect equanimity, and as he led his captive out of the wood he made many caustic remarks about the folly of private secretaries trying to steal pheasants' eggs in woods watched by his piercing eye.

Once out of the wood and free of the keeper, Mr. Millington Budge went off hot-foot to the Prime Minister with his complaint. He found him strangely unsympathetic. He said, with an icy coldness, that it was not one of his secretary's duties to chase his little niece for miles on a blazing hot day, that it was very bad for her, and he had looked for him to show more sense. He added, without any expression of regret or proffer of assistance, that he seemed to have got into a very ridiculous position. Mr. Millington Budge defended his action with earnest and indignant warmth; but he came from the interview feeling dimly that he had not really distinguished himself.

None the less, at breakfast next morning the Prime Minister scolded the Lady Noggs severely for disobeying his injunction against trespassing in the Stiffgate woods.

"But how could I help it? Silly Dick chased me there!" cried the Lady Noggs in a very wail of injured innocence.

It was a plausible excuse, though it showed a strange blindness, in one so clear-headed, to the fact that she had herself directed the chase—from in front. But the Prime Minister promptly changed the grounds of reproach, and dwelt on the great injury she had done to the career of Mr. Millington Budge by letting him in for a prosecution for poaching.

The Lady Noggs considered this matter for a while; then she said with gloomy reluctance: "I suppose I must go and see Sir Hildebrand Wyse, and square the Bench."

The Prime Minister shuddered to hear one so young talk so lightly of tampering with justice at its very source; but before he could protest his niece said firmly: "But I know what it is, uncle, you must send Silly Dick away. He only worries you, and he's no use at all. It's no good your saying he is, because he isn't."

She gave forth the last words with the air of a challenge, and the Prime Minister did not take it up. His scrupulous soul would not let him contradict her, for she spoke the truth. He only wished he could see some way of getting rid of his incubus.

The Lady Noggs waited for his reply, but seeing that none came, she went on: "Perhaps I'd better

see what I can do to get rid of him for you, uncle."

The Prime Minister thought that she had been seeing what she could do, but he said with a sudden and very real anxiety: "I can not have you interfering in these matters, Felicia. Little girls should learn their lessons and play with their dolls."

"Very well, uncle; only I should have liked to try," said the Lady Noggs a little wistfully; then, after a pause, she added: "Don't you think he's very like one of those burrs that stick to your stockings and won't come off?"

"I really can not discuss Mr. Budge with you," said the Prime Minister restively. And the discussion ceased.

That afternoon the Lady Noggs rode over to visit her friend, Sir Hildebrand Wyse, one of the local magistrates. She explained to him with modest glee the true inwardness of Mr. Millington Budge's presence in Colonel Stiffgate's wood, favored him with an exceedingly unfavorable character-sketch of that gentleman, and received his assurance that the Bench would deal lightly with him. Then she had tea with him, and after it left him, her mind at rest about the strenuous secretary.

The Bench did deal lightly with Mr. Millington Budge, dismissing the case and reprimanding the

gamekeeper for his misplaced zeal, much to Mr. Millington Budge's relief and to the great exasperation of Colonel Stiffgate.

But though she was at these pains to save Mr. Millington Budge's career, the Lady Noggs, disregarding wholly her uncle's prohibition against interference, began to do what in her lay to bring him to the fact that Stonorill was not a place in which his splendid energy could find its freest and fullest expression.

The apple-pie bed and the booby-trap entered suddenly into his experience, and he found them ruffling to the dignity of a budding statesman. In the presence of every one but her uncle, whose gray hairs she respected more or less, she addressed him, with a familiarity which bred contempt of him in them, as "Silly Dick." With the same publicity, and with but little exact knowledge, she would upbraid him with the shortcomings of his secretarial work; and she lost no chance of criticizing unkindly his appearance, dress and manners.

Suddenly he began to suspect that the authority which he had won so easily was beginning to slip from him. She was undermining the respect which his strenuousness had exacted. Being unable, after careful thought, to find any way of dealing with

such an opponent, he appealed to her uncle. He was a little doubtful about the wisdom of such a course, for from the manner in which the Prime Minister had received his earlier complaint, he judged him to be given to an excessive indulgence of his niece. But at the same time, he was convinced that he realized fully the enormous value of his services to him, and in the end he made the appeal with full confidence. He bumped himself hard against a settled conviction.

The Prime Minister said coldly: "It's entirely your own fault, Mr. Budge. You interfered deliberately and very foolishly with Lady Grandison when it was no part of your duty, and she is paying you back in your own coin. I am afraid I can not move in the matter."

Even the thickness of Mr. Millington Budge's skin was not proof against this; and he came from the interview in a very bad temper, and stricken with a sudden and quite amazing feeling that he was no longer in extreme request at Stonorill. He resolved to make his strenuous earnestness more deeply felt.

On second thoughts the Prime Minister, in spite of his ingrained deep contempt for politicians, came to the conclusion that it was not fitting that his niece

should bait them, and he addressed a half-hearted remonstrance to her on the matter.

The only result was that now the Lady Noggs addressed Mr. Millington Budge as Silly Dick, the sneak.

He cast about yet the more diligently for an opportunity of demonstrating his strenuous vigor. But before he could find one the member for Protherstone was killed in a motor-car accident; and ten minutes after he had received the information, without waiting to consult the Party Organization, the Prime Minister offered him the chance of contesting the seat. To his surprise, for it was a great chance, Mr. Millington Budge asked for time to consider the matter. The Prime Minister gave him till eight o'clock that evening, since it was imperative that the candidate should hasten to Protherstone at once.

Mr. Millington Budge left him with a distracted soul. On the one hand, he saw the great chance of entering Parliament as the chosen champion of his party in an important election; on the other hand, the Duchess of Huddersfield arrived at Stonorill that very afternoon, and he had been looking forward with an immense joyful expectation to sunning himself in her portly presence. The thought that he must forego that warming process wrung

his soul with the acutest pang. In the middle of his wrestling with himself he came upon the Lady Noggs on her way to the woods, and addressed a few earnest words to her on the subject of awaiting at home, quietly, the coming of the duchess, and putting on her best frock.

"Put on my best frock—wait at home—for Aunt Elizabeth? S-s-silly Dick!" said the Lady Noggs, and left him.

He returned to his mental struggle; and since his was one of those great minds to which their desires become duties, he was fast making up his mind that he must be faithful to the Prime Minister and stay at Stonorill.

The Prime Minister drove the duchess from the station; she went to her room to repair the ravages of travel, and came out on the lawn to tea. She was the first to come, and sat down by the table. Then came Mr. Millington Budge, and was hovering heavily about her, devising a pleasing form of address, while she surveyed him somewhat stolidly through her glasses. He was on the point of addressing her in a very pleasing fashion when the Lady Noggs came out of the shrubbery, still in her linen frock, her hair disheveled, swinging her hat in her hand. She kissed the duchess, and the duchess

expressed her approval of her healthy appearance, nodded toward Mr. Millington Budge, and said: "Who's this? Introduce him."

"Silly Dick—the Duchess of Huddersfield," said the Lady Noggs in a very clear voice.

Mr. Millington Budge bounded a little bound into the air; the duchess clapped her glasses to her eyes, and said: "Eh? What? Who?"

"Silly Dick—uncle's new secretary. Everybody calls him Silly Dick—except uncle; and I think he calls him Silly Dick to himself," said the Lady Noggs with implacable sweet suavity.

An infuriated grunt came from the purple but speechless Mr. Millington Budge; he turned on his heel and went straight and sternly to the house to pack his portmanteau for Protherstone. He had heard the call of duty with uncommon distinctness.

CHAPTER V

AN ESSAY IN MATCH-MAKING

THE Prime Minister never knew why Mr. Millington Budge so quickly made up his mind to contest the vacant seat at Protherstone, for the Lady Noggs explained hastily to her aunt why it had been necessary to introduce Mr. Millington Budge in so uncompromising a formula.

The duchess had said in a grumbling tone: "Well, I shan't split on you, Noggs; that kind of man wants keeping in his place. Of course, he's got to go. Errington is always landing himself with the wrong kind of person when he picks them for himself. Why didn't he come to me? I've got two men who would suit him exactly."

"Are they like Billy—Mr. Borrodaile?" said the Lady Noggs quickly.

"William Borrodaile was a bit of a treasure—too good to last. Besides, we had to get him started in politics," said the duchess thoughtfully.

The Prime Minister came out on the lawn, and

the Lady Noggs observed that his face was beaming.

"I've just been introduced to your secretary, Errington," said the duchess. "Where did you dig him up?"

"Ah, I suppose Felicia has been prejudicing you against him. They do not get on well together. But Mr. Budge is no longer my secretary. He has just made up his mind to accept my offer to contest Protherstone, and he is packing."

"That's a good thing," said the duchess. "I've got a man, or rather I've got two, who will just do for you." And over their tea they discussed the respective claims of her two protégés.

The Lady Noggs was uncommonly elated by her success in disembarrassing Stonorill of the strenuous energy of Mr. Millington Budge; for she was convinced that her formula of introduction had been of no little help to him in making up his mind to plunge into active politics. She began to dream dreams of doing a little disembarrassing on her own account.

She was aware, in a child's dim way, that Miss Stetson possessed all the virtues, both moral and intellectual. She recognized her goodness of heart also, and she even cherished a mild affection for

her, an affection increased by the knowledge th she had done her the service, by consenting to lea from her, of enabling her to retain her post a continue to pay for the education of her little brot er. She regarded herself as Miss Stetson's ben factor. But her affection for her was weakene and all her governess' excellences were outweigh by her inveterate habit of gushing. Firmness a coldness were alike unavailing to check it; it jarr on the Lady Noggs every time; she could not e dure it.

Miss Stetson, on the contrary, was rather pro of it; she regarded it as the outstanding sign of richly emotional nature.

The Lady Noggs observed, with her uncomm shrewdness, that her uncle had got rid of Mr. M lington Budge by elevating him to a loftier positio She cudgeled her brains to find some way of dea ing with Miss Stetson in a like fashion—if on Miss Stetson could be removed to another post well paid, that she might be able to continue to p for her brother's education out of her salary.

By way of paving the way for such a remov she talked to the duchess of Miss Stetson's exc lences till that good-natured lady grew heartily tir of the theme. Worse still, at the end of all t

panegyrics the duchess said: "I'm glad you've got such an excellent young woman to look after you. It's a wonder, seeing that Errington chose her himself."

The duchess saw no reason for concealing from any one in the world the poor opinion she entertained of the practical abilities of the men of her family.

The Lady Noggs was disheartened. Then fortune, as was fortune's way, came to her aid. She was taking off her riding-habit in her bedroom one afternoon when Mrs. Greenwood, accompanied by Clara, the first housemaid, came into her sitting-room, and through the half-open door she heard Clara say:

"I tell you, Mrs. Greenwood, as I've seen them look at each other like as there's no mistaking."

"Well, I never should ha' thought it," said Mrs. Greenwood. "I always thought Miss Stetson was bound up in them silly books she is always reading."

"Oh, we all thinks of sweethearts! All women does," said Clara cynically.

"You'll excuse me, Clara, but I never thinks of anything of the kind," said Mrs. Greenwood with dignity.

"Oh, but you're a widow, Mrs. Greenwood. You've only got to beckon with your finger and you can have the pick of them."

From the crinkling of starched linen it was plain that Mrs. Greenwood had bridled; and she said in a scornful but pleased tone: "They'll wait a long time before I beckons. Greenwood was enough for me."

There was a pause, and then Clara said thoughtfully: "I expect Mr. Gregg will take a bit of beckoning. He's a very shy gentleman."

"Well, if there's anything in what you say, and they're really beginning to fancy each other, it's certain Miss Stetson will have to help him a bit afore he'll come to the scratch. And I don't think as she'll know how. She ain't much gumption, an' that's a fact. Noggs turns her round her little finger."

"Lady Felicia, please, Greenwood," said the Lady Noggs, with what on the face of any one but a peeress would have been a grin.

There was some bustle; Clara scuttled out of the nursery, and Mrs. Greenwood came into the bedroom with a red face, saying: "I beg pardon, your ladyship, I didn't know your ladyship was here."

"Oh, I don't mind," said the Lady Noggs care-

lessly. "But why didn't you tell me Miss Stetson and Mr. Gregg were sweethearts?"

"Good gracious, your ladyship, I never said they were!" cried Mrs. Greenwood.

"No. Clara said so," said the Lady Noggs, and she was silent a while, considering the matter. Then she said: "How will Miss Stetson have to help him?"

"Your ladyship oughtn't to talk about such things! You're not old enough!" cried Mrs. Greenwood in some dismay.

"But I want to know," said the Lady Noggs coldly.

"I'm not going to talk about them," said Mrs. Greenwood with virtuous firmness.

"I expect you don't know. But uncle will," said the Lady Noggs thoughtfully.

"Good gracious, your ladyship! You're never going to talk to him about such things!" cried Mrs. Greenwood with yet livelier dismay.

"Yes, I am. Why not?"

"Oh, dear! Whatever will he think you hears us talking about?"

"I shan't tell him where I heard about it," said the Lady Noggs.

The next morning the Prime Minister came into

the morning-room in a comparatively cheerful frame of mind. But his face fell and his heart sank within him at the sight of his little niece standing on the hearth-rug awaiting him; for all that, looking as she did as if she had just stepped out of one of Sir Joshua Reynolds' pictures, she presented a charming appearance to his sensitive eye.

He knew by many sad experiences that she was never on time for breakfast unless she had something to gain by it, and he had a wholesome dread of the things she wanted and her methods of gaining them. He had but helped himself to his first chop, and she was handing him his first cup of coffee, when the blow fell.

"Why do women always think about sweethearts, uncle?" she said.

The Prime Minister gasped; this was worse than he had expected.

"They don't," he said miserably.

The Lady Noggs looked at him carefully. She found a lack of honest conviction in his tone, and his face wore no air of certainty.

"Are you sure? I heard a woman say they did," she said.

"I wish people would be more careful what they

say before you," said the Prime Minister with natural irritation. "You're only eleven, and——"

"Eleven and a half," said the Lady Noggs quickly.

"You ought not to begin thinking about such matters for another seven or eight years."

"I don't—at least, I only think they're silly," said his niece with extreme disdain.

"They are—very silly," said the Prime Minister with warm assent. "They're a passing phase of sentiment, or rather sentimentality, which afflicts the young between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two—of no importance whatever."

"Oh, I see," said the Lady Noggs, somewhat oppressed by the long incomprehensible words. "Did you ever have a sweetheart, uncle?"

The Prime Minister blushed deeply, caught at his beard and cried with severe indignation: "It is ill-mannered to ask personal questions, Felicia."

"Yes, of course. I forgot," said the Lady Noggs contritely.

A silence, grateful indeed to the Prime Minister, followed, and they went on with their breakfast.

Presently the Lady Noggs said: "How do you help people who are in love with each other to come to the scratch?"

The Prime Minister gasped again, and said tartly: "I never do."

"Don't you?" said his niece, looking at him with unaffected amazement. "But if you did, how would you?"

"I wouldn't! Nothing would induce me to!" said the Prime Minister with some vehemence.

The Lady Noggs, in some disappointment, paused to consider his strange attitude; then she said, with a sigh: "I was afraid you mightn't be able to tell me."

The Prime Minister said nothing. The matter looked as if it were dropping, and he was content that it should drop.

Presently the Lady Noggs said: "I suppose coming to the scratch means getting married?"

"It sounds like it," said the Prime Minister with a sudden cynical animation.

The Lady Noggs mused a while; then she said: "Mr. Gregg's rich, isn't he?"

"Mr. Gregg?—Mr. Gregg?—oh, Mr. Cringle's curate. Yes; I am told that he has a large private income. Why?"

"Oh, I only wanted to know."

Lastly she said: "I wish Billy were here. He could always tell me things."

The Prime Minister lacked the insight to follow his niece's process of thought from the universal feminine interest in sweethearts to Mr. William Borrodaile, who was pursuing a political career in town. He said: "I wish he were here myself. He had an excellent judgment."

The Lady Noggs left the morning-room dissatisfied. She had had, indeed, no great expectation that her uncle would prove illuminating, but she had thought it just possible. She was at a loss to whom to turn, and she distrusted her power to promote the union of two loving hearts without some instruction in the methods of that operation. At last, with infinite sadness, she made up her mind that she must write to Mr. Borrodaile. The lost art of letter-writing was as abhorrent to her as to the rest of the forgetful world, and she executed the epistle with many sighs of impatient weariness. It ran:

"Dear Billy—Will you please tell me how you help two people to fall in love and get maryd? They have began. Please give Violet my best love. These are for her. x x x x x x

"Yours sincerely,
"Noggs."

She posted the letter with no little pride, and

awaited the answer, with even more impatience. It came on the third morning, and ran:

"My Dear Noggs—Since I know that you are always actuated by the loftiest of motives, I do not hesitate to give you the information you ask.

"(1) Throw them together.

"(2) Tell him the nice things she says about him.

"(3) Tell her the nice things he says about her.

"This has never been known to fail. Violet sends you her dearest love.

"These are from me. x x x x x x x

"Your most fervent admirer,

"WILLIAM BORRODAILE."

The Lady Noggs spelled the letter through with painful care. When she came to the last sentence she gasped and muttered: "Oh! I wish he was here!" dashed up the stairs to the nursery, and indited the following post-card at a breakneck speed:

"Those kisses are just like your cheek.—NOGGS."

Then, soothed by this ungrateful but prompt action, she set herself to consider the methods he advised. The second and third instructions were easy enough. The first, "Throw them together," presented great, to all seeming insuperable, difficulties.

She took the phrase, as a child often will take a common figure of speech, quite literally; and she conceived herself called on to perform the Herculean feat of taking two well-grown young people, one in one hand, one in the other, and casting them before her so that they fell together in the same spot. She pondered the matter; she puzzled over it. Taking it with the rest of the letter, she could not believe that Mr. Borrodaile was chaffing her, and she cudgeled her small but active brain for the method of fulfilling his bidding. At last she gave it up, and made up her mind to begin by carrying out the other two easier instructions.

Accordingly, when lessons came to an end that morning she did not, as usual, leave the room like a brilliant cyclone, but lingered and said: "Don't you like Mr. Gregg's sermons, Miss Stetson?"

Her governess looked at her with some surprise, for she had never observed any absorbed attention to those discourses on the part of her pupil.

"Oh, yes, I like them," she said with some indifference.

"Don't you think he's awfully nice?"

"Yes," said Miss Stetson carelessly.

A smile of content illumined her pupil's face, and she left the room like an arrow from the bow.

That afternoon she contrived to encounter Mr. Gregg making his swift brief round of visits to the sick. She reined in her pony and walked beside him, asking him questions about the arrangements of the coming school treat.

Mr. Gregg was a meek, pink, diffident young man, large-handed and larger-footed, of about five feet eleven and a lathy slimness. He was charmed by the easy graciousness of the Lady Noggs, and well aware that to be seen on these friendly terms with her would raise him in the estimation of his flock, who went as near adoring her as the temperamental limitations of the English rustic allowed. Moreover, her vivid dark beauty delighted his eye.

Suddenly she dropped the school treat and said: "Miss Stetson does like your sermons."

By laying sufficient stress on the "does" she contrived to rid Miss Stetson's statement of its indifference without any definite sacrifice of veracity.

Mr. Gregg's quiet pink became a rich rose-pink at the grateful compliment. He was very proud of his sermons, and he spent much of the boundless leisure enjoyed by a village curate in polishing them. Moreover, rumor had magnified Miss Stetson's attainments to such a degree that a compliment from so brilliant a creature was a compliment indeed.

"D-d-d-does she?" he stammered.

"Yes, she does. She told me she did," said the Lady Noggs with emphasis.

"I'm very pleased to hear it."

"She thinks you're very nice, too," said the Lady Noggs, driving the nail home.

"Dear me! You don't say so!" cried Mr. Gregg, and the rich rose-pink of his cheeks became a warm crimson.

"She told me so," said the Lady Noggs gravely.

"This is very unexpected. I never suspected——" said Mr. Gregg, and stopped short.

"Oh, I knew she liked you!" said the ingenuous child with an air of some superiority.

They walked a little farther in silence, Mr. Gregg struggling to adjust himself to his new and delightful position in the world as an object of admiration to a young woman of vast intellectual attainments. He was quite unable to accomplish the adjustment at the moment; the revelation had been too sudden; he needed time.

The Lady Noggs broke in upon his struggle with the words: "Don't you think Miss Stetson's awfully clever?"

"Very—very," said the curate, with all the conviction born of her appreciation of his sermons.

"She can teach people in the German way," said the Lady Noggs solemnly.

"Can she indeed?" murmured the awestruck curate.

"She couldn't teach me that way," said the Lady Noggs with a sudden access of honesty. "But then, I expect I haven't got the right kind of head. She teaches me in the English way—interesting things."

"It shows wonderful adaptability," said Mr. Gregg, disposed to find every virtue in an admirer of his sermons.

The Lady Noggs pondered the phrase, and stored it in her mind for use in the future. Then she said: "Don't you think she's very nice?"

"Charming—charming!" said Mr. Gregg, with the genuine fervor of the appreciated.

The Lady Noggs had got what she wanted. She bade him good-by and rode off. Then she had a happy thought; she reined in her pony and cried: "Will you come to tea with me to-morrow? Uncle is up in town, and I shan't have to have tea with any ministers or anything."

"I shall be delighted," cried Mr. Gregg with alacrity.

She waved her hand and rode off.

When she had changed her riding-habit for a

frock she went to tea with Miss Stetson. In the middle of it she said, with some abruptness: "I met Mr. Gregg this afternoon; he thinks you're awfully clever."

"Does he?" said Miss Stetson, but faintly warmed by a tribute she felt only her due.

"Yes; and he says you're charming."

This was a tribute indeed; and Miss Stetson sat up in her chair with a flush on her cheeks, and began to consider her impressions of Mr. Gregg with some care.

As a matter of fact, Clara's imagination had built up a budding love-affair on no foundation of fact whatever. As a definitely intellectual young woman, Miss Stetson was inclined to have a soul above curates, and she had given Mr. Gregg very little of her attention. Her pupil's flattering information made him bulk with a sudden new bigness in her eyes.

The Lady Noggs went on with her tea, saying no more. Her silence gave Miss Stetson time to sort her impressions and find the right term for Mr. Gregg's wealth of pink feature and length of limb. She could not call him handsome—she decided that he was "distinguished."

"He said you had wonderful adaptability," said the Lady Noggs with some suddenness.

Miss Stetson again flushed with pleasure and said: "You—you seem to have talked a great deal about me."

"No—not a great deal—only a little," said the Lady Noggs.

None the less, she left on Miss Stetson's mind the impression that Mr. Gregg had shown a very lively and flattering interest in her.

Thus it came about that both she and Mr. Gregg were giving to each other a good deal of that kindly thought which is wont to be lavished on the appreciator.

They met at tea on the morrow, therefore, disposed to find each other very attractive. Mr. Gregg found Miss Stetson's gushing volubility exceedingly pleasing, since it relieved his shyness from the pain of making conversation. She found it no less pleasing to have an impressed listener.

The Lady Noggs watched them for a while with an earnestness of which they were, perhaps fortunately, unaware. She was, on the whole, content, though she could have wished that the signs of the tender passion were plainer to the eye.

When, very soon after tea, they came to discuss

high intellectual themes, such as the comparative genius of Miss Marie Corelli and Mr. Hall Caine, she slipped away and left them to it.

When, two hours later, the entranced Mr. Gregg awoke to the fact that he had made a three hours' call and took his leave, both of them felt that they had spent a most profitable and illuminating afternoon.

That evening the Lady Noggs obtained from Miss Stetson a short panegyric on Mr. Gregg, in which, among other things, she said that it had been a great pleasure to meet a man of such a cultivated and sympathetic mind in the somewhat barren intellectual waste through which her path at present lay. By a splendid effort of will the Lady Noggs contrived to commit to memory a version of this phrase.

The next day she met Mr. Gregg, and, after some casual talk, she knitted her brow and said, with manifest difficulty: "Miss Stetson says it's awfully pleasant to meet a cultivated man like you—and —and sympathetic in the barren, intelligent, somewhat waste through her path."

It was Mr. Gregg's turn to knit his brows; but the words "cultivated man" rang very clearly and distinctly above the rest of the cryptic utterance; his

face was wreathed with smiles of pleasure, and he plunged into a panegyric on Miss Stetson. The Lady Noggs lost no time in pouring all of it she could remember into her ears.

The Lady Noggs had kindled the spark of passion, and it was soon a raging flame, as raging a flame, that is, as the moderate temperaments of Mr. Gregg and Miss Stetson permitted. They met frequently; on their walks the Lady Noggs and Miss Stetson were always chancing on Mr. Gregg; often he came to tea. All the while the Lady Noggs had scores of nice things said by the one to repeat to the other, and she repeated them.

She should have been content. But she was not experienced in the manifestations of the tender passion. She was under the impression that something in the way of violent treatment was requisite to bring the affair to a connubial end. She had doubtless acquired that impression from Mr. Borrodaile's letter; and she was haunted by the discomfiting sense of not having really completed her task.

Again she fell to pondering the instruction "Throw them together," and at last she hit on the idea that Mr. Borrodaile had not meant that she should with her own hand throw the loving pair to one spot, but that she was to do so by some ingen-

ious device. The idea brought the operation into the realm of the feasible, but it did not really advance matters, since the ingenious device refused to be discovered. This hindrance irked sorely the Lady Noggs' passion for thoroughness.

The affair, however, was progressing with the most favorable rapidity, or rather it progressed with the most favorable rapidity up to a certain point, and there it stuck.

Mr. Gregg's shyness and modesty prevented him from offering himself to Miss Stetson. Doubtless in the course of time he would have overcome this shyness by internal effort without any violent external propulsion. But fortune again came to the aid of the Lady Noggs.

One morning Miss Stetson said that she wanted to go to Micklefield, the nearest town, to do some shopping, and the Lady Noggs offered to drive her in her pony cart. Miss Stetson accepted the offer, and brightened the drive, for herself if not for her pupil, by a gushing appreciation of the natural beauties of the roadside. This appreciation merely suggested to her pupil the idea of upsetting the pony cart; and she was only restrained from doing so by the consideration that Miss Stetson was under her protection.

At Micklefield they shopped and had tea. On their way home they overtook Mr. Gregg, dusty and wayworn, after a long walk to visit a distant member of his flock. The Lady Noggs invited him to finish his journey in the pony cart. He accepted with brisk and blushing alacrity and at once plunged into serious conversation with Miss Stetson, or, rather, he plunged into listening to Miss Stetson's serious conversation. The Lady Noggs drove on without paying any heed to their talk; but, as always in their society, the question of the means of throwing them together rose in her mind and worried her.

Of a sudden she had a truly brilliant idea. They were passing along an unfenced road across a common. On either side of the road were little heaps of stone lying ready to be spread on worn patches of it. The pony cart, of the butter-tumbler kind, was low; the grass was thick. She saw her way, at last, to perform easily the Herculean feat Mr. Borrodaile had imposed on her, and on the instant she acted. She turned off the road and ran one wheel of the cart up one of the heaps of stones. The cart was tilted over, and as the wheel reached the top of the heap it fell on to its side and rolled the three of them on to the grass.

The Lady Noggs, prepared for the event, landed on her feet, still holding the reins. With a wild and unnecessary shriek Miss Stetson tumbled on to Mr. Gregg, they rolled over, and sat up staring at each other in mingled surprise and dismay. The Lady Noggs looked down on them with a flush of triumph on her happy face.

Mr. Gregg scrambled to his feet, and with many expressions of the liveliest and tenderest concern, helped Miss Stetson to hers. She was in a great flutter; she pressed her hand to her heart and blinked and gasped. She had never before been in such an interesting situation, and she made the most of it. Mr. Gregg deplored loudly the shock she must have suffered; the Lady Noggs, apologizing fluently for the mishap, thought that her governess was making far too great a fuss.

Presently she recovered somewhat, and Mr. Gregg was able to turn his attention to the pony cart, and righted it. It was undamaged; the Lady Noggs got into it, then Mr. Gregg said to Miss Stetson: "I don't think this pony cart is safe for you. We are quite close to Stonorill. Won't you walk?"

"Whatever you think best," Miss Stetson murmured, with a languishing glance at him.

The Lady Noggs surveyed them carefully, th she said: "Well, I may as well go on then; go by."

A hundred yards down the road she looked ba Miss Stetson was leaning on Mr. Gregg's arm, a their heads were very close together. She smi a smile of deep content and whipped up the po When she reached the castle she did not go out, found a story book and sat in the hall waiting. H an hour passed, an hour, another twenty minut then they came, and she looked at them with ea interest. To her disappointment she saw noth out of the common in their appearance to assure of success; only, their eyes were shining. She w out and left them together.

She did not return until supper-time. When came into the room, before she could ward her to her extreme disgust, Miss Stetson caught her her arms and hugged and kissed her.

"I'm so happy! I must kiss some one! Gregg and I are going to be married!" she cried

"I'm glad—I wish you many happy returns- mean I congratulate you," said the Lady Nog freeing herself firmly from Miss Stetson's em tional grasp.

"We owe it to you! We shall never be able

feel sufficiently grateful! You threw us together, beautiful darling!" gushed Miss Stetson.

The Lady Noggs winced at the painful endearment, and said gravely: "Yes, I hope it didn't hurt much."



CHAPTER VI

ELIZABETH'S CONVERSION

THE next morning on rising from her bed the Lady Noggs executed a short dance, expressive of joyous exhilaration, in the middle of her spacious bedroom. She was ignorant of the fact that a decorous period of time must elapse between an engagement and a marriage, and she looked forward to enjoying a complete freedom from the acquisition of knowledge in about a fortnight.

She was doomed to suffer an early disappointment. She went out into the garden as soon as she was dressed, and there she found Miss Stetson.

Miss Stetson was feeling very pleasant, or, as she herself preferred to phrase it, was communing with nature. In her quite natural but exuberant joy, she made a dash at her little pupil with the intention of lavishing a fervid embrace or two on her; but her little pupil evaded her clasping arms with uncommon and most creditable agility.

Then they walked side by side along the lawn, the Lady Noggs carefully keeping a space of six

feet between them lest she should find herself suddenly and ignominiously snatched to the bosom of her expansive governess.

For a while Miss Stetson unburdened her overladen soul in eulogies of Mr. Gregg. The Lady Noggs found them exaggerated, but she let them flow uninterrupted. But at last sheer exhaustion stayed Miss Stetson's volubility.

The Lady Noggs took advantage of her pause to recover breath, and said: "Shall you be married next week?"

"Next week, darling? What an extraordinary idea! We shan't get married for months and months. A six-months' engagement is the least my father will hear of—I'm sure of it."

Disgust held the Lady Noggs silent.

Miss Stetson's volubility was diverted to an ecstatic appreciation of the joys of the engaged state. It lasted till it was time for the Lady Noggs to join her uncle at breakfast.

She came into the breakfast-room very glum indeed, suffering from the oppressive sense of wasted labor. Again and again she assured herself that she would never have taken the trouble to bring about a matrimonial alliance between Miss Stetson and Mr. Gregg had she dreamed that it would not

bring her an early release from the acquisition of knowledge. Not only was six months an interminable period, but she feared that it would give her uncle time to fill Miss Stetson's place, so that there would be no happy idle interregnum.

But misfortunes truly never come singly. As she settled gloomily down at the table, the Prime Minister laid down the letter he had been reading and said cheerfully: "You'll be pleased to hear, Felicia, that you're going to be less lonely for the next few weeks. You're going to have a visitor—a little girl."

"A little girl?" said the Lady Noggs, with no show of pleasure whatever.

"Yes, your cousin Elizabeth is coming to stay for a time. She has been working too hard in town, and has been ordered a complete rest in the country," said the Prime Minister with unabated cheerfulness.

"Oh!" said the Lady Noggs gloomily.

"So you'll have to be very nice to her."

"I suppose I shall," said the Lady Noggs with a perfect freedom from enthusiasm.

The Prime Minister eyed her with sudden suspicion and said somewhat tartly: "I should have

thought you would have been pleased at the chance of doing a kindly action."

Sensible of having been put in the wrong, the Lady Noggs considered her answer carefully. Then she said: "I don't mind the kindly action, but I should like to be going to do it to some one else, and not Elizabeth."

"She's a very clever little girl—a very clever little girl," said the Prime Minister warmly.

"Dreadfully," said the Lady Noggs.

The Prime Minister frowned and said stiffly: "This contempt for mental ability is wrong—very wrong."

The Lady Noggs looked at him thoughtfully, weighing the matter. Then she said: "Oh, it isn't cleverness I mind. Look at Billy, now—the way he can pull your leg is a corker."

"Felicia! Do not, I beg you, use such slang!" cried the Prime Minister in anguish.

"It's awfully clever, I mean," said the Lady Noggs, correcting the fault. "So it's not cleverness I hate really. It's the way people are clever, and the things they're clever in—algebra, now. Elizabeth is full of algebra. I don't know what algebra is. I've never done any. But I'm sure it's beastly."

The Prime Minister was checked. As an Oxford man he had enjoyed a classical education, and even now remembered the excruciating agony of his struggle to pass the mathematical part of Smalls. With all the will in the world to do so, he could not bring himself to speak well of algebra, and he said rather lamely: "When you are older, you will understand these things better."

"Not algebra," said the Lady Noggs firmly.

"The er—the er—use of algebra—is—er. The higher intellectual attainments must rest on a solid basis; and such things as algebra, useless as they may seem, are parts of that basis. They—er—help to train the mind."

This lucid statement of the case only spread a more funereal gloom over the face of the Lady Noggs; and muttering something about not wanting any higher intellectuals, if things were so, she went on gloomily with her breakfast.

The Prime Minister also went on with his breakfast in an absent-minded way, his scrupulous soul worrying him about the accuracy of the lucid statement. Presently he said: "At least that's what the educational authorities say."

The Lady Noggs vouchsafed no attention what-

ever to this, and two or three minutes later he added: "They may be right, of course."

"You'd better drink some coffee while it's hot," said the Lady Noggs coldly.

This awoke the Prime Minister, and he said: "So you'll remember Elizabeth's practically an invalid, and be very kind to her."

"I'll try; but I don't expect she'll let me," said the Lady Noggs, still gloomy.

Two days later that martyr to the sacred cause of education, the Honorable Elizabeth Pollifax, arrived. She was a pale child, with a high forehead and rather cold gray eyes. Her long training in priggishness had tightened her lips to an uncommon thinness and given her a nose with a singularly elastic tip. After long practise she could tip-tilt the petal of that flower till it was nearly at an angle of thirty-five degrees. Her face wore an expression of complacent self-sufficiency that might have graced the countenance of a blue-stocking of forty. Her hair, which would have been pretty had it had a chance, was parted in the middle, plastered tight down on the top of her head, and dragged into an ugly knot at the back.

The Lady Noggs met the train; and the two children greeted each other with no great show of

warmth. Elizabeth projected her cheek to be kissed, but the Lady Noggs, who had an almost boyish aversion from unnecessary kisses, failed to observe the motion and merely shook her cousin's limp hand. Then they examined each other's clothes after the manner of their sex, but with an openness which their more furtive elders would have avoided. The Lady Noggs observed with pain the ugly, hot, brown color and clumsy cut of Elizabeth's frock, and there was a gleam of something like jealousy in Elizabeth's cold eye as it rested on the vivid beauty of the Lady Noggs, and the charming frock and hat which set it off to such advantage. She congratulated herself with uncommon fervor that she had always been taught to despise such vanities.

They talked but little on the drive to Stonorill, and on reaching the castle the Lady Noggs took Elizabeth up to her room and summoned her nurse, Mrs. Greenwood, to unpack the trunks. She was much impressed, and not a little daunted, by the fact that one of them contained nothing but breakfast foods in tins and thick books, for her mother had said to Elizabeth that there was really no rest like a change of intellectual effort.

For the rest of the day things went well. Elizabeth endured the Lady Noggs' hospitable efforts to

entertain her without snubbing her with any great severity. Once or twice, indeed, she had to protest with a somewhat insufferable air that she had outgrown some of the suggested entertainments; but the Lady Noggs bore patiently with her superiority. At breakfast next morning, however, a night's rest had restored to Elizabeth the full strength of her acquired character. At the sight of the dishes on the breakfast table she raised her eyebrows in pained disapproval and sighed heavily. She said nothing, however, but ate quietly at her modest plate of striated barley, a confection of an unappetizing grayness, which the sniffing cook had prepared according to the directions on the tin with great, but suspicious, care. But when the Prime Minister actually helped himself to a chop, Elizabeth could no longer contain herself. She had to testify, and she cried: "Oh, uncle! You're never going to eat a chop! It's flesh!"

"Eh? What? Yes—certainly—it's the flesh of a sheep," said the startled Prime Minister, with a misplaced air of imparting the result of original research.

"Of a dead sheep," said Elizabeth.

"Yes, yes, my dear; it is dead. I—I—never eat chops off a living sheep—never," stammered the

Prime Minister, not having yet collected his wits scattered by the sudden onslaught.

"But, uncle, it's wrong, very wrong, to take life to gratify the appetite, when nature affords such quantities of fruit and vegetables which do not feel," said Elizabeth with funereal earnestness.

"Ah—um," said the Prime Minister.

"Besides, flesh is so bad for you—so coarsening. It interferes with your spiritual growth. You must feel it."

"I—I haven't noticed it," said the Prime Minister.

"Of course it must. Why, there are books and books that tell you all about it," said Elizabeth triumphantly.

The Prime Minister set down his knife and fork and looked about him with a harried air. He was no longer flustered; but he had grown fully alive to the horror of his position. Politeness bade him refrain from hurting the susceptibilities of his guest, and put away the mutton-bone of offense: on the other hand, the Lady Noggs was watching him with an eye ready to grow scornful should he yield; and he realized that a lack of firmness would injure irretrievably his by no means significant prestige with her. Choosing the better part, he went on with his

chop, though in a half-hearted, unhappy way, and said faintly: "I've never studied vegetarianism."

Elizabeth saw neither any reason why he should not study it, nor any time better than the present. Forthwith she poured upon him a lecture on the subject, prepared by her mother and delivered by herself to an audience of her unhappy little friends in the drawing-room of their town house. It went on and on and she kept the Prime Minister's nose to the grindstone by interjecting at intervals: "You can't deny that, can you, uncle?" or "Isn't that true, uncle?" There is, indeed, no saying how long it would have lasted, had not the Lady Noggs yawned frankly and helped herself to an egg.

"You're never going to eat an egg, Felicia!" cried Elizabeth.

"Yes; I am. Eggs can't feel," said the Lady Noggs firmly.

"But they contain potentialities of life!" cried Elizabeth.

"Do they?" said the Lady Noggs, peering earnestly into her egg to see.

"Of course they do. That egg might grow into a chicken."

"No; not a boiled egg," said the Lady Noggs,

with the aggravating superiority of the practical person confuting the theorist.

"Of course, I mean it might have done if it hadn't been boiled!"

"But it was boiled. Besides, you can never tell about eggs. So many of them get addled," said the Lady Noggs.

The elastic tip of Elizabeth's nose assumed an angle of thirty-five degrees, and she said contemptuously: "Ah, you have no power of ratiocination!"

"Ratio——? Ratio——? Haven't I, uncle?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Um—I think it's as well developed for your age as one can expect," said the Prime Minister.

"You see, you're wrong," said the Lady Noggs, with some triumph, to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth took refuge in a haughty silence, and went on with her cold but striated barley.

At last, to the Prime Minister's great relief, breakfast came to an end. The Lady Noggs was following Elizabeth out of the room, when she turned, pushed the door to, and said in a hushed voice: "Isn't she like Silly Dick? I believe she's sillier."

"You—you—must make allowances for her up-

bringing," said the Prime Minister, shamelessly betraying the higher cultivation. "And—and—mind you're kind to her."

"Oh, I'll be kind to her," said the Lady Noggs.

She found this process exceedingly difficult, since, along with her mother's milk or the 'ologies, Elizabeth seemed to have imbibed a settled cantankerousness. Her amiable nature unfolded itself first in the schoolroom. .

She was not allowed to work herself; but she insisted on attending the Lady Noggs' lessons, and followed them with a vast superciliousness. Now she would prompt the Lady Noggs with an exasperating patronage; now she would criticize the lessons themselves, assuring Miss Stetson that she had left such trivial studies many years behind her. She even grew bitter on the matter of the pageant of history, the only form in which the Lady Noggs would assimilate that science, declaring vehemently that the stories and picturesque persons who composed that pageant were not history at all, but matters and persons of legend. Again the stage in arithmetic at which the Lady Noggs had arrived awoke in her the liveliest contempt: "What?" she cried. "Still at fractions? And you're nearly twelve!"

All the morning the Lady Noggs only got one chance. During her French lesson Elizabeth prompted her once. Her strictures on the quality of Elizabeth's accent were somewhat unduly prolonged. Elizabeth had learned French from the enthusiastic young German lady who had filled her capacious mind with the rest of her knowledge; and the result was that she spoke it with a rich Pomeranian accent.

These strictures of the Lady Noggs added a deeper bitterness to the sneers Elizabeth lavished on the final lesson, a page of copy-book. She grew almost eloquent on the subject of a girl of nearly twelve still needing a copy-book to improve her handwriting. But when at last her reproaches had died down, her cousin, as she traversed painfully the tiresome page, obtained an opportunity for a little quiet reflection.

The result of that quiet reflection was that, as they came out of the schoolroom, the lady Noggs turned to Elizabeth, and said, with almost womanly sweetness: "Let's go to my room and do your hair more fluffily. I'm sure there's no need for you to look as plain as that, Bess."

Taken utterly by surprise Elizabeth gasped; then she stuttered: "M-m-my n-n-name's Elizabeth!"

"I like pet names," said the Lady Noggs with the same even sweetness. "I'll call you Bess; and you may call me Noggs."

"I won't do anything of the kind. It's vulgar!" cried Elizabeth with extraordinary heat.

"Oh, no, it isn't," said the Lady Noggs firmly. "Vulgar things are things that are common, and Noggs isn't common. I never knew any one but me called Noggs, though Miss Stetson told me that there is a man called Noggs in a book."

"I mean the practise of calling people nicknames is vulgar," said Elizabeth.

"I think it's friendly," said the Lady Noggs. "But come on; let's come and do your hair. That's the important thing."

"I don't want my hair done! I do it like this on purpose! People who cultivate their intellects don't trouble about outward appearances," said Elizabeth, in an extraordinary exasperation.

"Uncle does; he's very particular," said the Lady Noggs. "But it's just as you like. At any rate, I'll lend you a frock for tea—a frock that fits."

"I don't want your frocks!" cried Elizabeth, breathless with fury; and she turned on her heel and left her.

The Lady Noggs went her way much refreshed. Her conscience, indeed, pricked her, for she could not feel that she had acted with perfect kindness. But she soothed it by the assurance that she had done Elizabeth good.

At lunch she had forgotten Elizabeth's gibes, and was all kindliness; but Elizabeth was cold, not to say sulky. At tea, which they held in the drawing-room, she was even worse. For not only did the Lady Noggs' unkind words about her way of doing her hair and the fit of her frock force on her the contrast between them with a disagreeable violence, but the three or four people who had motored over to see the Prime Minister took no notice of her, but gave an amount of attention to the Lady Noggs which Elizabeth could not but think out of proportion to her intellectual acquirements. In her mother's drawing-room it was different indeed. There she had but to open her mouth to find faithful advanced friends of her mother hanging respectfully on her lips; and often, after she had spoken, they would congratulate her on the excellence of her sentiments and the beauty of their expression.

She tried to console herself with the thought that

her uncle's visitors were but frivolous persons; yet it was hard to see another shine, and that other a little girl of her own age.

The thought rankled still after the departure of the visitors, and had much to do with the curt firmness with which she rejected the different amusements suggested by the Lady Noggs, and finally said: "Games have no attraction for me. They are a great waste of time. I shall get a book from the library."

Curiosity no less than politeness drew the Lady Noggs to the library with her; but when Elizabeth chose a large likely-looking volume by Karl Schumacher, entitled *An Inquiry Into the Basic Religion of the Primitive Aryans,* she stole quietly away to more congenial pursuits. Elizabeth read steadily away, enjoying thoroughly not so much the book, of which she understood but little, as the consciousness of performing a meritoriously cultivated action.

She lugged the volume up-stairs with her to the nursery supper, and talked of it to Miss Stetson, with a condescension so exquisite that that worthy young woman, who had so bemoaned the Lady Noggs' intellectual impermeability, could not for the life of her understand her sudden extravagant thankfulness that the Lady Noggs and not Elizabeth

was her pupil. Of the Lady Noggs Elizabeth took no notice whatever.

At breakfast next morning she put forward her views with some insistence, or rather her mother's views, on the necessity for the immediate abolition of the House of Lords. The Prime Minister, who had no morbid craving for dialectics at the breakfast-table, and had an inkling that it would be about as easy to eradicate Gibraltar as an impression from the mind of Elizabeth, tried vainly to brush the subject lightly aside.

Elizabeth would have none of it. She stuck to the subject like a limpet, and tried to extort a like tenacity from him. At last she had him thoroughly worried, when of a sudden the Lady Noggs came to the rescue.

"Shut up, Elizabeth, and let uncle get his breakfast. Everything's getting cold," she said firmly.

Elizabeth turned on her, the elastic tip of her nose seeking the familiar angle of thirty-five degrees, and said with some pointedness: "Of course, you don't want to hear intelligent conversation. You can't understand it."

The Prime Minister frowned at her; but the Lady Noggs said with perfect good temper: "I don't

know many intelligent things, but I know lots about the House of Lords. They're always coming here and boring uncle; aren't they, uncle?"

The Prime Minister took sudden refuge in his cup of coffee.

"And if the poor old things hadn't got the House to go to, they'd come here worse than ever. So it would be awfully silly to do away with it. Do get on with your barley, and let uncle have his breakfast."

As she ended she fixed Elizabeth with a liquid but decided eye; and Elizabeth got on with her barley.

But though she could defend her uncle, the Lady Noggs found herself suffering from an access of true politeness which forbade her defending herself; and Elizabeth came again to the schoolroom with firm intent to make herself again disagreeable by an assertion of superiority. She succeeded in making herself disagreeable; but she failed to annoy the Lady Noggs, since she had had time to make up her mind that she did not really care much about anything any one said about her intellect, and least of all what Elizabeth said, since Elizabeth was, as she phrased it to herself, an awful rotter. Elizabeth was deeply disgusted by this insensibility. She had, however, some consolation in the evening when she chanced on the Lady Noggs returning home after

suffering misfortune in the course of a zoological inquiry into the domestic habits of the kestrel. She was limping along, hatless, with a badly torn frock, a scratched face and a hand bandaged with a bloody handkerchief. Elizabeth hastened to point out how childish, nay, how babyish it is to tear one's frock, an act, in truth, of which no intelligent child could be guilty, of which she had not been guilty since she was eight years old.

The Lady Noggs was hardly in the mood for true politeness.

"How was I to tell the beastly branch wouldn't bear me?" she said fiercely. "And, anyhow, you couldn't have got half-way up the tree!"

"I should never have tried to do anything so foolish!" said Elizabeth coldly, and she went on her way with a happy feeling that once more she had really scored.

The next morning the Prime Minister came to breakfast to find the table laid only for two and no Elizabeth.

"Where's your cousin?" he said, with the patient resignation of one speaking of the thorn in his flesh.

"She's having her barley with Miss Stetson," said the Lady Noggs cheerfully. "I wasn't going to let you be worried again at breakfast."

In spite of himself the Prime Minister's face grew

brighter; but he said: "But—but—it's hardly courteous. One must first consider the feelings of one's guest."

"Oh, it's all right," said the Lady Noggs in the same cheerful tone. "Elizabeth doesn't know anything about courtesy. I expect she's too clever. She said I did it because I was jealous of her with you. So I let her think so. It—it seemed to please her somehow."

The Prime Minister, who liked to go to his work with an even mind, accepted the situation, though not without a qualm of conscience. In the middle of breakfast he said: "You don't seem to get on well with Elizabeth."

"No, not very; and it's funny. I generally get on with people all right," said the Lady Noggs thoughtfully.

"You must make allowances for an invalid's irritability," said the Prime Minister.

"I don't think it's that," said the Lady Noggs even more thoughtfully. "I think she'd be just the same to me if she were ever so well. She wants some one more intelligent."

"You've a good enough intelligence," said the Prime Minister with some sharpness.

"Not in books," said the Lady Noggs with conviction.

The Prime Minister fell into one of his musings, during which he took his breakfast entirely by the directions of his watchful niece. After a long while he said: "Books are important—very important; but life is important too, distinctly important. And there is an intelligence in life." Then he awoke quite, and said: "You must bear with Elizabeth, and try to keep her cheerful. It's so much a part of health."

"Cheerful? Elizabeth? Oh, well, I'll try," said the Lady Noggs doubtfully.

With this end in view that afternoon she set herself firmly to make Elizabeth cheerful, persuaded her to come for a walk in the woods, showed her her favorite nooks, and pointed out the doings of such furred and feathered denizens as presented themselves to their sight.

Elizabeth knew very well that the cultivated person takes a deep joy in nature; but her superior cantankerousness was very strong on her. She could not bring herself to share any interest of so inferior a child as her cousin; and she declared both the fauna and the flora of the Stonorill woods to be

wholly uninteresting. At last, however, she found a way of amusing herself. She broke off a switch, and began with painstaking industry to knock as many flowers off their stems as she could. It jarred horribly on the Lady Noggs, but she endured it as long as she could; then she said: "I wish you'd leave the flowers alone. What do you want to kill them for? They haven't done any harm."

"Flowers are silly things," said Elizabeth contemptuously.

"They're very pretty," said the Lady Noggs.

For all answer Elizabeth turned her switch upon a bed of ragged robins, with firm intent to make them more ragged than robins before she had done with them. The Lady Noggs said no more, but snatched the switch from Elizabeth and tossed it into a bramble-bush. Their walk came to an end.

Great was the wrath and deep the displeasure of Elizabeth at this cavalier firmness of the Lady Noggs. So great and deep were they, indeed, that for two days the children only met at meals. Elizabeth did not even come to the schoolroom during lessons to aggravate by a display of superior accomplishment. She established herself with the epoch-making work of Professor Karl Schumacher in retired nooks of the gardens where her cousin could not easily find her. Yet, in spite of this freez-

ing aloofness, the Lady Noggs had a fancy that her cousin regarded her with different, more respectful eyes.

She ignored Elizabeth's aloofness, and the grunts with which she had received polite inquiries and suggestions; but she did not force any attentions on her. If they chanced to come together, she was ready with the civility of a hostess, and there she let it rest; she saw no use in going out of her way to offer herself as the butt of Elizabeth's superiority. She saw, too, that Elizabeth was looking better for the change, and with that she was content. On her part, Elizabeth read diligently Herr Schumacher's *Inquiry Into the Basic Religion of the Primitive Aryans;* but she soon found it a thankless task, since no one lavished on her that admiration which the strenuous endeavor should have extracted from them. She abandoned it, and mooned about.

Now had she been exposed to the ordinary educational influences, she would have known that Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do, and might have been on her guard. But her mother had carefully sheltered her from such influences; and she was not on her guard. Thus it came about that the Lady Noggs, coming past the room at the end of the hothouses which had been fitted with hutches and pens, in which dwelt her rabbits, guinea-

pigs, a pair of tortoises and the affectionate mongoos, which with perfect impartiality bit her or any one else who was trusting enough to give it the chance, heard an agonized squeaking of guinea-pigs.

She dashed into the room to find Elizabeth in front of the guinea-pig hutch, and in the hutch among the guinea-pigs a kitten. Elizabeth and the kitten were enjoying themselves immensely; the guinea-pigs were in the last extremity of squeaking terror.

The Lady Noggs nearly knocked Elizabeth down in her spring to the hutch door; opened it; snatched the kitten out, and dropped it on the floor. Then, in a flaming fury, she turned on Elizabeth, crying: "You beastly little vegetarian!" caught her by the shoulders and shook, and shook, and shook. Her muscles were in good trim; righteous wrath braced them yet more firm to the effort; and before she had done, Elizabeth's teeth were snapping together with the click of castanets. At last the Lady Noggs' arms gave out, and she thrust Elizabeth through the door, saying: "There—that'll teach you to be cruel!"

She was, of course, quite wrong. If the shaking had any moral effect at all, it would teach Elizabeth not to be cruel.

Elizabeth staggered down the path in considerable uncertainty whether she stood on her head or her heels. The Lady Noggs having soothed the guinea-pigs, and seen them presently engaged in repairing, from a juicy sow-thistle, the loss of tissue caused by fright, went quietly off to the home wood till the world should have calmed down sufficiently to listen quietly to her excellent reasons for shaking Elizabeth.

When she returned at tea-time, resolved to defend that action with some truculence, to her surprise no one said anything about the shaking. Plainly Elizabeth had not told. The Lady Noggs was exceedingly surprised, but she saw no reason why she herself should rend the veil of silence; and she contented herself with keeping a wary eye on her cousin, in readiness for an outburst of revelation. None came.

The surprise of Lady Noggs grew, and presently she fancied that she perceived a change in Elizabeth's bearing: the tip of her nose seemed to have lost some of its elasticity, for she did not tip-tilt it at every contribution of the Lady Noggs to the conversation; neither did she lavish contemptuous glances on her; nor did her mobile lips curl scornfully as she listened to her talk. She was silent and

subdued during tea; and the Lady Noggs began to fear that the shaking had made her ill. She was, however, relieved of the fear by the fact that Elizabeth ate a good deal more than usual.

Elizabeth's subdued bearing persisted throughout the day; and on the morning of the morrow she was at the pains to be civil to her cousin thrice. In the afternoon the Lady Noggs set out to the wood, and before she had gone very far she became aware that Elizabeth was following her. To make sure she quickened her pace, then presently looked back to find Elizabeth trotting after her.

Elizabeth saw her backward glance and cried: "W-w-wait a minute! I-I-want to speak to you!"

The Lady Noggs stopped, and Elizabeth came up rather breathless.

"I-I-wanted to say—I d-d-don't mind your doing my hair like you said," she stammered, panting.

"All right. Come along," said the Lady Noggs cheerfully, and they returned to the house to struggle with her cousin's locks.

Two days later they came back, very late for supper, from a pleasant communing with nature, Elizabeth every whit as disheveled, as dirty and as torn as the Lady Noggs herself. The change of air seemed to be doing her good.

BOOK II

THE GIRL



CHAPTER I

THE TEACHER OF BRIDGE

IF as a child the Lady Noggs was of that vivid beauty which Sir Joshua Reynolds so loved to paint, as a girl she was of beauty which every great painter would love to paint. Perhaps the realists should be excepted, since a beauty so exquisite as hers rather gives the lie to their fantastic appreciation of the world, in a fashion which can not but be annoying. There is no doubt, however, that that beauty sometimes makes the name of Noggs seem a little lacking in aptness.

As she came along the street with her swift easy grace, even the polite were constrained to turn their heads and look after her. She drew the eye with an irresistible attraction. She had been at a dance till early in the morning, for she was taking her joy in her first season with the thoroughness with which she did most things to which she set her hand; but she looked as fresh as a dairy-maid who had gone to bed at sunset; and she ran up the steps of Huddersfield House with the lightness of unwearied limbs.

When she entered the house, she gathered from the manner of Symons, the decorous old butler, that there was trouble afoot, for he led the way to the duchess' boudoir with the air of a man draped in crape. She was, therefore, but little surprised to find her aunt's round full face, usually so like a contented moon, clouded with trouble and dismay.

"Good morning, Noggs," she said heavily, in funereal accents. "It's a relief to see the one member of one's family who isn't a born fool. I see that Errington put his foot into it again in the House last night."

"Oh, uncle knows what he's doing. He's played politics too long not to," the Lady Noggs protested loyally; for she would never hear a word from any one against the uncle with whom she lived, and whom she ruled.

The duchess grunted.

"What's the matter, auntie? What are you looking so upset about?"

"Anne is driving me out of my mind," said the duchess heavily. "You may as well know it. Every one will know it soon, or probably they do know it. She is talking of marrying that wretched adventurer who teaches bridge, Wriothesley; and she'll do it. Ah, she's been a most unfortunate

girl! First, Drippenham's dying before he came into the title, and leaving her a widow with a wretched two thousand a year; and now this business with this miserable adventurer. It's going to be a bad business, too; Anne's as obstinate as she's silly."

"Perhaps they're in love with each other," said the Lady Noggs.

"In love!" cried the duchess, with the snort of a war-horse. "Anne thinks she is; but this—this wretched rogue is in love with her two thousand a year!"

"Do you really think so? Are you quite sure of it?"

"For goodness' sake don't you be a silly romantic child, too!" cried the duchess; and she broke into a long, long jeremiad in which she bewailed the disastrous consequences, from every point of view, of the match, and ended with a long disquisition on the appalling nature of her future son-in-law.

"He must be just like one of Balzac's heroes," said the Lady Noggs, when lack of breath brought the jeremiad to its end.

"About whom you ought to know nothing! I

don't know what girls are coming to!" cried the duchess.

"Perhaps if Anne had read her Balzac, she might have recognized the type in time," said her niece thoughtfully.

"Now look here, Noggs, I looked for a little sympathy from you, not gibes!" cried the duchess indignantly.

"Well, they're not married yet, auntie," said the Lady Noggs, in a soothing voice. "Perhaps Anne's eyes will be opened in time."

"Oh, she's infatuated—quite infatuated; and when these obstinate ones get infatuated, there's no doing anything with them," said the duchess; but her face had grown less gloomy.

"Well, if he's really a bad lot, you must open her eyes," said the Lady Noggs.

"Open her eyes? How can I, if she's infatuated?"

"Oh, they'll get opened," said her niece cheerfully. "I'll go up and see Anne."

The duchess' face had grown almost serene, and she said: "It's always a comfort to talk to you, Noggs. You and Errington are the only members of the family with any intelligence, and his is no use to any one."

"Oh, it made him Prime Minister for a good many years, you know," said the Lady Noggs, going to the door.

"Nonsense! His family made him Prime Minister!" said the duchess tartly; and the Lady Noggs said no more.

She went slowly up-stairs, pondering this doubtful affair, and found Lady Drippenham, a large, fair young woman, with a very fine complexion, pretty blue eyes, and a mass of yellow hair, making a languid breakfast in bed.

"Oh, Noggs, I have such a headache!" she cried. "I went to the Pinkleys' dance; and after it, about four o'clock, twenty of us motored down to Richmond, just as we were, and went on the river. It was so funny, every one in evening dress. But I didn't get to bed till seven; and then I couldn't sleep. I was too tired."

"You must have been too tired to enjoy the river —at that hour—after a dance."

"Oh, no! It was delightful! Hamilton Wriothesley drove me down and rowed me on the river."

"Did he?" said her cousin coldly.

"Why do you say it like that?" cried Lady Drippenham, flushing with fretful anger. "Have you

seen mother this morning? Has she been talking to you?"

"Yes; I've just seen her," said the Lady Noggs, in an entirely non-committal tone.

"And she's been abusing Hamilton! I know she has! It's outrageous—perfectly outrageous!"

"That's exactly what she said," said the Lady Noggs.

"It's monstrous that she should abuse him as she does! She calls him an outsider; and his manners are charming. She calls him an adventurer, and he's as honest as the day. Why, he's told me half a dozen times that though the money is next to nothing to him now, he would never have let himself fall in love with me, if I hadn't had it. He's frankness itself, and she calls him a fortune-hunter. Could anything be more ridiculous?"

The Lady Noggs could not think of many things more ridiculous, but she did not say so.

"Besides, things have changed so in the last few years," Lady Drippenham went on. "I've seen it myself. And surely I'm old enough to know what I want—what's going to give me a good time. Isn't that so?"

"Is it?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, you're detestable this morning!" cried her

cousin. "But there, what can a child like you be expected to know about it? You can't imagine how a man like Hamilton sweeps one away."

"It sounds rather infatuated, don't you think?" said the Lady Noggs, with engaging candor.

"Of all the things to say!" gasped her cousin. "And you—a girl just out—not twenty—to a married woman like me!"

"You'll never be as old as I am, really, you know, 'Anne. It's no good pretending you will," said the Lady Noggs with quiet but irritating conviction.

"Of all the cheek!" cried Lady Drippenham. "Really, I don't know why I talk to you at all—a chit of a girl!"

"People always do. I suppose it's because I'm interested in them. And so you're actually going to marry Mr. Wriothesley. Are you very fond of him, 'Anne?" said the Lady Noggs in a much more gentle tone that invited confidence.

"Yes; I am. He's the dearest fellow," said the Lady Drippenham, blushing faintly; and she broke into a panegyric on her hero of about the same length as the duchess' jeremiad on the same theme.

At the end of it the Lady Noggs said sadly: "Ah, you won't talk like that when you've been married to him a year, Anne," and left abruptly.

She came back to the duchess, in her boudoir, and found that the duke was with her. From the length of their usually round faces, it was plain that they had been discussing the menacing mésalliance.

"How did you find her, Noggs?" said the duchess eagerly.

The Lady Noggs bade her uncle good morning, and replied: "Oh, she seems very bad—dreadfully in love with him. There's nothing to be done."

"We'll see about that!" cried the duke; and his florid face assumed a crimson tinge. "If that young feller comes marryin' where he isn't wanted, he'll find himself jolly well mistaken."

"What will you do to him, uncle?" said the Lady Noggs with the liveliest interest.

The duke snorted like a war-horse—a habit he had acquired, by unconscious imitation, from his wife. His chest swelled, and he said firmly: "I'll precious soon show him that——"

"There, that'll do, Sigismund. Let's talk sense. It's no good blustering with these adventurers. Can't you see any way out of it, Noggs?" said the duchess; and the duke subsided, muttering something about every bone in Mr. Wriothesley's body.

The Lady Noggs was used to being called on for help and suggestions by the different branches of

her family. Her active girlhood seemed to have gifted her with a mind uncommonly fertile in ingenious devices.

"I don't see that you can do anything at all," she said slowly. "You seem to have set Anne's back up. If you'd merely laughed at her about him that might have worked—unless, of course, she's really as much in love with him as she seems to be. No; you can't do anything; she won't stop seeing him, she won't go away and give herself a chance. Besides, he may be honestly in love with her; and then I don't see that you have any right to interfere." She spoke with the air of a sage.

"No right? No right?" blustered the duke.

"Oh, shut up, Sigismund!" said the duchess. "Really, Noggs, I did think you'd more sense," she went on angrily. "Of course, we've every right to prevent Anne making a fool of herself—and unhappy—and—and that sort of thing."

"Oh, well, if you're quite sure she is," said the Lady Noggs doubtfully. "Hadn't you better make quite sure before you go taking a lot of trouble?"

The duke and duchess looked at her sternly.

"I didn't think you'd encourage her, Noggs," said the duchess gloomily.

"Oh, I'm not—not a bit. But I do like to know

where I am exactly. It saves so much time and trouble," said the Lady Noggs; and with that she took her leave of them.

She came away from Huddersfield House with puckered brow, walking slowly. She was not surprised by her aunt's news; for she had seen her cousin Anne and Hamilton Wriothesley together several times; and their manner to each other had left nothing to the imagination. She was none the more pleased by the news, for she did not conceive that an alliance with Hamilton Wriothesley would add anything to the prestige of the family; and she was fond of Anne. She was loath, indeed, that she should make a marriage which should turn out discreditable and unhappy. On the other hand, she felt quite as strongly that, if the pair were sincerely in love with each other, it was no one's business but their own, and no one had any right to interfere with them. If their passion were sincere, such interference might bring about a quite needless unhappiness. Truly its sincerity was the important point; and at last she came to the conclusion that she would like to see for herself whether Hamilton Wriothesley returned Anne's passionate affection with an equal warmth. With her, to make up her mind was to act; on reaching home she went to the telephone,

rang up Hamilton Wriothesley, and arranged with him that he should give her a course of bridge lessons. When, next day, he gave her the first lesson, she gave a great deal more attention to the teacher than to his teaching.

Mr. Hamilton Wriothesley, the eldest son of an auctioneer in a country town, had attained man's estate under the name of Hubert Bagshaw. He had long entertained a suspicion that he was by nature closely akin to the lilies of the field; and in his twenty-first year his aversion from work had attained such proportions as to convince him beyond a doubt that his suspicion was correct. Coincident with the confirmation of the suspicion came the inheritance of two hundred pounds from a misguided aunt. He changed his name, and armed with this sum went forth into the world to make his fortune as a gentleman.

He was not ill-equipped for the profession. He had a fine confidence in himself. His mirror assured him that he was good-looking in the dark romantic style. He believed himself to have good manners, since he knew that he was known in local society as "a very gentlemanly young fellow." He knew himself to be proficient in the art of humoring people, and an adept in the useful games in which

women also take part, lawn tennis, golf, bridge and dancing. He went forth into the world, therefore, with a heart of triple brass; and there is reason to believe that the smooth white skin of his boyish brow covered the same durable material.

His rise in the social scale had been steady and sure. Fortune favors the brazen; luck, kind widows, and a congenital incapacity for perceiving a snub had played large parts in it. He had naturally learned to expect a good deal from fortune; but it was years since he had even dreamed of such a piece of luck as the infatuation of Lady Drippenham; and he was resolved to avail himself of it to establish himself in life on a firm monetary basis.

The Lady Noggs admired the manner in which he gave her the bridge lesson. He combined, most skilfully, the firmness of the teacher with a pleasant deference. She found him very good-looking, and gifted with an uncommonly charming voice. But none the less she did not like him; her instinct bade her distrust him; and she felt that, if there was anything in heredity, she might trust that instinct, since it should be an inheritance from ancestors who had played leading parts in the polite world for two hundred years and more, and so had been brought into

contact with the most brilliant adventurous rogues of their respective generations.

After the lesson tea was brought to them, and over it he talked. He talked at length and earnestly about the entirely foolish things which filled, to the exclusion of everything else, the minds of the set with which he consorted, about bridge, motoring, racing, restaurants and musical comedy; and he conveyed to her the strongest impression that he was exactly suited to that set. She made up her mind that, though he might easily be as unscrupulous and selfish as the heroes of Balzac, he lacked their brains. Several times he gave her languishing glances from his fine eyes. She took it that they had become an unconscious habit with him; but when, in bidding her good-by, he squeezed her hand, she felt that her first instinct about him had been justified, and that she had excellent reason to try to test his devotion to her cousin.

It came about, therefore, that she let no social diversion interfere with those bridge lessons; and Hamilton Wriothesley matched her in punctuality. He did not put off a single one of them, and found them grow more and more interesting.

His pupil played the part of the timid and admiring ingénue with an accuracy which was the more

admirable, seeing that she was neither timid nor admiring, and enjoyed very little of the ignorance of the ingénue. For, though this was only her first season, she had for the last two years played hostess for her uncle at Stonorill; and the experience had not been wasted on her lively intelligence.

They fell, insensibly, into the way of lingering over their tea after each lesson, and the Lady Noggs saw to it that no visitors intruded on these hours. Presently her teacher began to talk freely and fondly, to her quiet joy, of himself. It was the theme on which he loved best to dilate and on which, consequently, he dilated with the most agreeable eloquence. He had a dim belief that he was impressing her with his forceful and magnetic personality. How should he have dreamed that he was inspiring into her a belief, which increased with each fresh presentation of that magnetic personality, that he was a greedy but brainless animal of an uncommonly detestable kind.

As his realization of the forceful impression he was making on her grew, his languishing glances were more frequent, his handclasps at coming and going warmer. He postponed his plan of cutting the Gordian knot of the opposition of the duke and duchess, which had waxed warm, by marrying

Lady Drippenham before a registrar. The fact was that the mere being in a position to carry out such a plan had turned his head. He began to see himself as a society Napoleon capable of conquering and ruling the world of society by a marriage with Lady Grandison and her forty thousand a year.

He knew enough to know that the mere suspicion that he had such an audacity in mind would provoke a truly volcanic upheaval; that he would not only bring about his ears the Grandisons, the Erringtons, the Hartlepools, the Huddersfields and the Lymington-Greens, but that also all the mothers of marriageable sons in society would band together, for once, to drive him from their midst. But he had no intention in the world of letting any one dream of his audacity until he had brought off the coup. He fondly assured himself that what was a registrar for Lady Drippenham was a registrar for Lady Grandison. The bridge lessons gave him every opportunity of molding what he fondly believed to be her plastic girlish heart to a violent passion for him; there was no need for him to awake suspicion by being seen with her abroad.

The Lady Noggs was quick to perceive, with great pleasure, his conviction of his attraction for her; and she did nothing to weaken it. She wel-

comed it rather as rendering the testing process easier; for she had been somewhat exercised in mind about it. She had felt strongly that it was utterly unfitting that she, if only because she was the head of the Grandison family, should give him encouragement; and without going some of the way to meet him, the test seemed difficult indeed to make. It was a relief to find that his profound appreciation of his conquering charm made encouragement hardly necessary. To all seeming, she had but to maintain her attitude of admiring timidity, and his conceit would do the rest.

It is to be feared, however, that, though she had set about the test from noble motives of the most disinterested altruism, she presently began to take pleasure in it as in a game. It is even to be feared that now and again in a moment of extreme enjoyment of this conquering lover's heroic pose, she so far forgot the demands of bashfulness as to return his languishing glances. He could have sworn that she did. On the other hand, the depths of her great starry eyes seemed always wells of passion; and he might easily have been mistaken. Be that as it may, these glances and a dozen incidents of the nature of smothered sighs, probably of repressed boredom, and accidental touchings of the hands over the cards,



trifles taken apart, but of great cumulative weight, buoyed him up to the final height of confidence; and he resolved to put the matter to the touch.

He would have hesitated, could he have seen the smile of mischievous joy that wreathed his pupil's face whenever the door closed behind her teacher's broad back, or heard the rippling laugh of whole-hearted enjoyment that followed it. Sometimes, indeed, that laugh was followed by a short dance which, expressive as it was of the lighter emotions, hardly befitted a young peeress of marriageable age.

But Hamilton Wriothesley could not see through a closed door; and with a view to bringing the affair to an early fortunate conclusion, he invoked the aid of his friend, Mrs. Addy Scarlet, a lady blessed by fortune with a vastly wealthy and apparently invisible husband, and as much on the social make as Hamilton Wriothesley himself. In the terms of the slang which prevailed at the moment, Mrs. Addy Scarlet was very crisp; and she was, above all, noted for the extraordinary crispness of her week-end gatherings at the Villa Scarlet in the Surrey Hills. Persons of the most exalted foreign station had been known to speak with pleasure of the complete freedom from stickiness of those gath-

Hamilton Wriothesley made up his mind that one of those gatherings would give him the proper mise en scène for his declaration. He had a kind of rule-of-thumb knowledge of women, of the women, that is, of the frothy, frivolous, pleasure-mad set in which he was so welcome. Such a knowledge was the chief part of his equipment as an adventurer; for, like all the men of his kidney, he found silly women his mainstay. He thought that in the atmosphere of feverish irresponsibility of the Villa Scarlet, and in the romantic setting of its moonlit gardens, the declaration of his passionate devotion would sweep his dazzled pupil off her feet.

Moreover, the reputation of those week-ends was such that for a girl of the set in which Lady Grandison moved to come to one of them would be proof positive that she was as desperately in love with him as he believed. She could only come because he would be there.

Accordingly, he called on his good friend Mrs. Addy Scarlet, and after talking with her, or rather listening to her tale of her recent social victories and reverses, he said: "Have you ever thought of asking Lady Grandison to one of your week-ends?"

He threw out the suggestion in the most casual way; for if there was one person in the world whom

he wished to keep in ignorance of his splendid design, it was his good friend, Mrs. Addy Scarlet.

"Good heavens, no, Hammy!" screamed Mrs. Addy Scarlet in the high-pitched voice she had acquired from long and strenuous efforts to out-shriek in ordinary conversation her voluble friends.

Hamilton Wriothesley frowned at the affectionate nickname, for he found it injurious to his romantic air. Indeed, he often wished that he had adopted a Christian name which would not lend itself to ridiculous diminution, though, such was the ingenuity of his amiable friends, it would have been hard indeed to find one they could not contort.

"Why not ask her? She is young; and I'm sure she's fond of fun," he said carelessly.

"You don't really think it's worth trying? Oh, it would be a score if she came, I don't think!" cried Mrs. Addy Scarlet, shriller than ever.

"Everything's worth trying," said Hamilton Wriothesley, summing up his philosophy of life in three words.

"Right oh! I'll try it. What couldn't I work her for if once she did come!" cried Mrs. Addy Scarlet, visions of the opening of long-barred portals rising before her enraptured imagination.

Mr. Hamilton Wriothesley thought that he would

see to it that she did nothing of the kind. "If she does come, I should think you'd better go a bit more gently that week-end," he said.

"Yes, yes, Teddy mustn't come; and Mabel mustn't come," she said quickly.

"And you might omit the Crickletons."

"Right oh! Oh, if she did come! You—you may touch me for a hundred, if she does, Hammy."

"I will," said Mr. Hamilton Wriothesley simply.

Forthwith they proceeded to discuss the exact terms of the note in which the invitation should be conveyed; and then they collaborated in the writing of it. They were pleased with their joint production; and he left her house with a pleasant smile on his handsome face.

That afternoon, as he was taking his leave of her after a protracted tea, he asked the Lady Noggs if, by any chance, she were going to the Villa Scarlet for the week-end; and when she said she was not, he sighed gently, and said he had had a faint hope that he might meet her there. As nothing in the world was less likely than that she should go to the Villa Scarlet, she spent some time wondering why he had told her such a thumping lie.

Lord Errington at breakfast next morning wondered why his niece laughed suddenly at a letter.

It was an invitation to Mrs. Addy Scarlet's week-end gathering. After breakfast she was in the very act of writing to decline it, when she changed her mind, and smiling mischievously, put on her hat and walked briskly round to Huddersfield House. She found Lady Drippenham breakfasting in bed, and looking both weary and worried.

"Again dissipation?" said the Lady Noggs.

Lady Drippenham replied with some heat that her cousin must have reached home at exactly the same small hour as herself.

"But consider my constitution," said the Lady Noggs, who looked as fresh as if she had been going to bed at eight for a fortnight. "I came to ask if you're going, by any chance, to spend the week-end at Mrs. Scarlet's Surrey villa?"

"Yes; I am," said her cousin quickly. "And I've just had an awful row with mother about it. I've refused twice; but this time I'm going to accept. I don't know what's happened to Hamilton lately. He's quite changed—he's grown so reserved. I can't think why."

The Lady Noggs could have suggested an excellent reason; but she did not. She only said:

"Yes; and I'm going to see why it is. I'm sure I shall find the woman there."

The Lady Noggs shared her assurance; but she only said: "Then we shall be able to take care of each other."

"What! You're not going?" cried Lady Drippenham. "You'll never be allowed! They say awful things about those week-ends!"

"Oh, if any one has amusing parties, there's always a lot of scandal-mongers to say that they're worse than the fetes of Heliogabalus. I want to see what those week-ends are like. And since uncle will be away, there will be no one to stop me."

"I won't have anything to do with it! I won't have a word to say to it!"

"That's all I want. If you keep quiet, no one will know that I've been there till it's over; and when they start making a fuss about it, I can point out that it's no good crying over spilled milk."

Her cousin hesitated; then she said weakly: "Of course, I shall get into a row, too, for letting you go; but it's nothing but rows now, and an extra one makes no difference. And, oh, it will be a comfort to have you there! I've been rather frightened about it. And, of course, I can look after you."

"Of course you can," said the Lady Noggs

heartily, though she thought that if any looking after were done, she would be the one to do it. "But what are you frightened about? These people bark, or at least they howl a good bit, but they won't bite."

"One never knows who one may meet there," said her cousin gloomily.

"That's just the fun of it—meeting new people—fresh types," said the Lady Noggs.

They fell to discussing what they would wear; and after that important subject was exhausted, they made their arrangements to motor down to the Villa Scarlet together.

Now the invitation to Lady Drippenham had been an afterthought of Mrs. Addy Scarlet. She had no hope that she would accept it, after her earlier refusals; but if she did her presence would be a reward to Hamilton Wriothesley. It was the last reward he could have wished.

It came upon him, too, with some suddenness; for though he motored down early with Mrs. Scarlet, she forgot to tell him that Lady Drippenham was coming. When then the cousins arrived together on the Saturday afternoon in one of the Lady Noggs' cars, his angry passions rose with a jerk; and he did brief justice to the situation, under his

breath, in a few hasty but expressive words. Then he braced himself to meet it, and behaved with a masterly wariness. It seemed to him that he conducted the affair admirably, that he was keeping blind Lady Drippenham's quick eyes of love, that he not only stimulated the Lady Noggs' girlish adoration by an occasional burning glance and passionate tone, but that the sight of him shining so brilliantly in this brilliant circle stimulated it yet more.

The Lady Noggs was far from being bored. The gathering was crisp indeed; but thanks, perhaps, to the omission from it of those mystic figures, Teddy, Mabel and the Crickletons, its crispness was confined to the crude humor and boisterous fun dear to the heart of the fourth-form schoolboy. Enjoying as she did an excellent supply of animal spirits, she played her part in the noisy game with an ease that won her golden opinions. But she felt many times in the pauses in the merriment that she would have enjoyed herself so much more had she come to a Villa Scarlet week-end six years younger.

Hamilton Wriothesley proved her chief defense against boredom. The shifts to which he was put to keep her cousin blind and herself adoring, kept her at the highest pitch of lively interest. Several

times he had cause to wish with the most vehement heartiness that she was less of an ingénue, that she would not let her adoration of him grow most patent in the presence of Lady Drippenham. With an equal warmth he wished that she was less liable to a sudden access of timidity, which caused her to fly like a startled hind whenever a rare chance came of their being alone together. He never dreamed that she was very well aware that his blood ran cold at her artlessly adoring face in the presence of Lady Drippenham, and that she guessed how that blood boiled at her sudden accesses of shrinking timidity. It was a new game; and she enjoyed it very much.

She found another source of interest also in the change which had come over her friend, Hetty Salis. It would be difficult to say which of the two was the more surprised to find the other at the Villa Scarlet. Lady Salis was one of the Lady Noggs' closest friends. They had made friends two years before when they spent six weeks at the same hotel at Montreux. The Lady Noggs had been two or three times on visits to Salis Court; Lady Salis had been two or three times to Stonorill. The Lady Noggs had found her as charming as she was pretty; she was amazed to find her one of the rout at the Villa

Scarlet; and where was her husband to whom she was devoted?

She found that Lady Salis was likely to give her little chance of gratifying her curiosity; she avoided her. In those intervals, when her attention was not claimed by Mr. Hamilton Wriothesley, the Lady Noggs bestowed it on Hetty Salis. She found her indeed changed: she had lost her demure calm; she was nervous, restless and feverish; she was among the noisiest of that noisy party; she was gambling high at bridge. The Lady Noggs watched her and watched her; and at last she came to the conclusion that Hetty Salis was running away from something, seeking refuge from it, and quite vainly, in this feverish distraction. She made up her mind that she must have her confidence by hook or by crook; she might be able to help her. She cudgeled her brains for some method of gaining it.

It was not till after tea on Sunday that she perceived a change in her cousin Anne, that she was watching her, especially when Hamilton Wriothesley was present, with very keen hostile eyes. At once the Lady Noggs let her admiration of him grow more patent than ever, with the result that, delighted as he was by this proof of his conquering charm, he firmly banished himself from their joint

society. With an equal firmness the Lady Noggs avoided the tete-à-tete which her injured cousin was so plainly seeking.

But after dinner she and Lady Drippenham were left together in the conservatory. The other women had drifted out into the garden; and the men lingered, in the anecdotic vein to judge from their merry laughter, over their wine. Lady Drippenham was fidgeting and frowning at her; the Lady Noggs, wearing an air of serene innocence, sat on the edge of the basin of the fountain throwing crumbs to the carp.

"I've found out the woman who has come between me and Hamilton!" said Lady Drippenham abruptly, scowling at her.

"Have you?" said the Lady Noggs, turning on her the eyes of limpid innocence.

"Yes; I have! And so have you!" said Lady Drippenham with some violence.

"Have I?" said the Lady Noggs, with the most artless surprise.

"Yes, you have. And you knew it all the time! I was never so surprised and disgusted in my life! I always thought you so straight, Noggs; and all the time you've been trying to get Hamilton away from me in the meanest and most deceitful way!"

"Never a try—at least, I don't think so," said the Lady Noggs cheerfully.

"You have! You know you have! And it's not fair! I declare it isn't! What chance have I with my wretched two thousand a year against you with your forty thousand?" cried Lady Drippenham with still greater heat.

"I should have thought that if Mr. Wriothesley were really in love with you, my forty thousand a year would hardly have affected him," said the Lady Noggs, dropping another crumb into the fountain.

"And it wouldn't, if you hadn't encouraged him. You've been leading him on; and you know you don't want him."

"I don't, indeed!" said the Lady Noggs in the very accents of the truth.

"Then why do you encourage him? You know how high-spirited he is; and how little encouragement he needs," said Lady Drippenham; and her voice began to break.

"Hush! Here he comes!" said the Lady Noggs, who could see through the drawing-room into the hall. "Quick! Get into that corner—behind the palms, and you'll see me encourage him! Quick!"

Lady Drippenham scuttled behind the palms; the Lady Noggs sat still; and Hamilton Wriothesley

hurried to her across the drawing-room. He was in that conquering mood that sometimes befalls a man after port and Grands Marniers on the top of too much champagne. He felt himself to be splendid; and certainly he was flushed. He came straight to the Lady Noggs, drawing the portière across the conservatory entrance as he came, said quickly: "I thought I never should get away from those jabbering idiots! What luck to find you alone!" and sat down beside her on the edge of the fountain.

"Didn't you?" said the Lady Noggs, smiling. "Did you try very hard to get away? I heard you laughing cheerfully enough."

"Were you eager for my coming, darling?" he said with a most fatuous fond air; and he put his arm around her, and drew her to him to kiss her.

His lips did not touch her face; but her hand touched his in a stinging resounding slap.

"You little devil!" he cried, springing up, and clapping his hand to the stinging expanse.

"You impertinent sweep!" said the Lady Noggs, with a contempt scarcely less stinging than the slap.

And pale, with flaming eyes, Lady Drippenham came out from the palms.

"Damnation!" said Hamilton Wriothesley; and he plunged violently through the nearest door out

into the night and the darkness to cool his fevered cheek.

"The cad! How could I? I—I'll never speak to him again!" cried Lady Drippenham, wringing her hands. Then she added fervently: "Oh, I do hate you, Noggs!"

"I expect you do," said the Lady Noggs coolly. "But that's all right, Anne. You'll soon get over it, and be glad you found out in time and escaped." Then, looking thoughtfully at her reddened palm, she added: "I wish my arm had been a bit freer, I could have hit him much harder."

CHAPTER II

'AN OLD FRIEND APPEARS

THE Lady Noggs was much pleased and encouraged by her success in opening her cousin's eyes to the true worth of Mr. Hamilton Wriothesley; and she entered with a very joyous zest into the boisterous occupations to which Mrs. 'Addy Scarlet's guests devoted themselves during the rest of the evening. Mr. Hamilton Wriothesley, usually the life and soul of such an evening, did not take part in them; he had betaken himself to a retired corner of the grounds where he was reflecting, to the music of the nightingales, on the folly of those who loose the substance to grasp at the shadow. He was greatly missed; but when it was perceived that Lady Drippenham was also missing, there were but few inquiries for him. It was taken for granted that the two of them were enjoying together the music of the nightingales. Really, Lady Drippenham had gone to bed, a sadder but a wiser woman.

All the evening the Lady Noggs kept a watchful eye on Hetty Salis. A success always set her longing for fresh fields in which to exercise her diplomatic talent; she had, by a somewhat painful process, dragged back her cousin from the edge of a precipice; and she was now longing to come to the help of her friend.

Accordingly, when physical exhaustion brought to an end the boisterousness of her fellow guests, and the bulk of them sat down to while away the rest of the night at bridge, she snatched Lady Salis away, took her up to her bedroom, talked to her and sending away her maid, brushed her hair for her. She was very soothing with her, and at last left her in a more peaceful mood than any in which she had seen her during their stay at the Villa Scarlet. She had not had her confidence, indeed; but she felt pretty sure that she had suggested herself as a safe and likely confidante; and she had received and accepted an invitation to spend the next week-end at Salis Court. She went to bed very well content with her evening's work, and slept the deep and dreamless sleep of those whose day has been crowned with meritorious achievement.

She was up next morning long before her hostess or any of her fellow guests. She enjoyed a stroll

through the really beautiful gardens of the villa, the more beautiful for their emptiness of the bright, blithe, shrieking throng which had so boisterously sported in them during the last two days. Then she made her breakfast, wrote a pleasant note of farewell to her sleeping hostess, and started in her motor-car to town. She did not wait for her cousin, for she took it that Lady Drippenham would not yet a while find her agreeable to look upon. She drove the car herself at a moderate speed; and even on the clear stretches of road free from villages she did not exceed the speed limit. As she felt it, Lady Grandison could not scorch.

In Trafalgar Square she drew up at the curb, ordered her chauffeur to drive back to the Villa Scarlet for Lady Drippenham, walked across the Square and went into the National Gallery. Her uncle had had her carefully trained in the appreciation of the arts, after he had discovered that she was not of a disposition to enjoy the study of metaphysics, in which his own soul delighted. She had a very good natural taste, and by dint of hearing the best music and seeing the best pictures which London and Paris afforded, she had come to have a youthfully strong intolerance of the second-best.

On one of the rare occasions on which her uncle

had addressed a moral reflection to her, he had suggested that if ever she found herself surfeited with the pleasures of the season, she might very well go to the National Gallery, and spend an hour with the big things.

"You should—er—er—find it bracing," he had added.

The sight of the pepper-caster with which British genius has surmounted one of the finest collections in the world, recalled his words to her mind; and since her taste was in something of a revolt against the crude delights of the Villa Scarlet, she thought that she might very well soothe it by trying his prescription. Besides, it was several months since she had been in the Gallery; and this was an excellent opportunity of refreshing her memories of the great masterpieces.

She had strolled slowly through two or three of the rooms when she became aware that she had excited the interest of a shabbily dressed young man in a soft hat. She was so used to exciting interest that she would have taken no notice of him had there not been something oddly familiar in the way in which he dogged her. He lay in wait for her in corners, and when she passed from room to room he contrived to meet her so as to get a view of her full

face. She had the odd feeling that she had passed through that very experience before. So used had she grown to this penalty of beauty that but for this odd feeling she would not have bestowed a glance on her curious pursuer. It induced her to take a careful look at him as he stood a few feet off waiting for her to draw near, but feigning to be studying the Velasquez before him. She was again surprised to find his fresh, eager young face familiar; but she could not for the life of her remember who he was.

This annoyed her; she had a good memory for faces and a good memory for names; and she cultivated both assiduously as necessary to the equipment of a leader of the polite world, should the fancy take her to play that part. Here was a face she could not place, and frowning at the failure of her memory, she sat down to think it out.

The young man moved on to another picture; then he turned, came straight to her, raised his hat, and said: "I beg your pardon. But you seem to have forgotten me. I'm Michael Broome."

"Michael Broome?" said the Lady Noggs, looking at his blushing face with even greater perplexity. Then her face cleared in a radiant smile, and holding out her hand, she said: "Of course! I know you now. You're the little boy I carried off from

Grimestone Square. I remember we wrote to each other for six months; and then we forgot each other and wrote no more."

"Oh, no; I never forgot," said Michael. "I only stopped writing because you didn't answer my letters."

"That was very shocking of me; but I did so hate writing letters in those days. I expect that every time I got one from you I made up my mind to answer it, and put it off and off and off till I forgot all about it."

"I expect that was it," said Michael, sitting down beside her. "But I say, what a splendid creature you've grown. I knew that you would grow into a splendid creature; but you're splendid beyond anything I ever dreamed."

"Thank you," said the Lady Noggs, smiling and blushing. "I do like compliments direct. There's no chance of one's missing them."

"Oh, it's not a compliment; it's the bare truth. You're just splendid."

"I remember now. Everything used to be 'splendid' with you in the old days. And what have you been doing all these years?" said the Lady Noggs.

Michael plunged into his history with a boyish zest in telling it to her, perhaps even more flattering

than outspoken eulogy. He had been at school till he was sixteen; it had been very nice, of course, but it had bored him dreadfully; the classics and the mathematics had bored him; and he hadn't cared much for the games. "I had the makings of a good left-hand, slow bowler in me though," he added reflectively. The only thing at which he had been any good was drawing; and at his own strenuous urging, and on the assurance of his drawing-master that he had a genuine talent for it, his father had taken him away from his public school and sent him to the Slade School. He had been at the Slade for a year and was, as he phrased it, getting on all right. Then he had persuaded his father to send him to Paris to the studio of a famous painter; and there, too, he had been "getting on all right." Then his father had died.

"I was awfully cut up," he said sadly. "Everything seemed at an end. You see, all that six months he was in England we lived together; and he gave me a splendid time. You had prepared me for it, of course; but after the time I had at Grimestone Square, you can imagine what it was to live with some one who cared for you, and was awfully keen on your getting a good time. When he had to go back to India, I was heartbroken—just that. Of

course, though, there were his letters; and they were splendid. When he died, more than a year ago—well, I didn't do any work at all for three months—just think of that."

"It must have been dreadful. You have been unlucky, Michael," said the Lady Noggs, her great eyes shining with sympathy.

"No, no; not unlucky," said Michael quickly. "It isn't many sons who have a father like that. Besides, there was always you, too."

"Me?" cried the Lady Noggs in utter surprise.

"Yes; I've always thought about you a good deal. You see, you were such a splendid little girl. There aren't many people who have any one so splendid to think about."

"I wonder you never came to see me," said the Lady Noggs.

"I often thought of it—in the holidays—after my father had gone back to India. But you had stopped writing; and I didn't like to. And then later it was enough to think about you. Besides, you might have grown up different. I should never have come to see you. It was only seeing you by chance like this, and finding you more splendid than ever, that made me speak to you."

"I ought to have answered your letters," said the Lady Noggs in a tone of contrition.

"I don't know—I don't know really," said Michael dreamily. "Dreams are very important things. I might have lost the dreams. You can't tell, you know."

He was silent a minute or two, thinking. She did not break into his thoughts. She studied covertly his keen boyish face, with the eager blue eyes and sensitive mouth.

Then she said, half to herself: "Yet you must have had lots of girl friends."

"Oh, no; how could I? There was you, Noggs—I—I beg your pardon—Lady Grandison."

The Lady Noggs hesitated a moment; then she said, with a smile: "You may call me Noggs, Michael. We're quite old enough friends." She had always cherished the benefactor's kindly feeling for the protégé of her childhood; and she had already taken a strong liking for this bright and eager boy that he had grown to be.

"May I? That's awfully sweet of you," he said, with shining eyes. "I've always thought of you as Noggs, of course."

They looked at each other with an odd, intimate, exploring gaze for a minute; then he took up his story again.

After the death of his father, when he did begin to work again, he found himself restless and uneasy

in Paris, and came back to London. He had but little money; a hundred a year till he was twenty-one, and then two hundred and fifty.

"It's a good deal for an artist," he said gravely; and the Lady Noggs thought uncomfortably of the forty thousand a year which would fall to her lot at that age. Accordingly, he had taken up his abode with his aunt at Grimestone Square. The Lady Noggs fancied that his enthusiasm for his work and his desire to be as free as possible to do it had braced him to beat down some opposition from his aunt. He had turned two of her attics into a studio; and he was also continuing his training in the studio of one of the most brilliant and original of the younger men who have firmly broken away from the stodgy British tradition of the Royal Academy. For the last three months he had been devoting himself, at home, to lithography, and was "getting the hang of it." He had done, among other things, three portraits; the last of them was quite promising. He had half a mind to devote himself chiefly to lithography. It was not half a bad thing to specialize nowadays.

"I should like to see your work," said the Lady Noggs. "Let's get lunch somewhere and then go on to your studio."

"That's a splendid idea. I should love to show

it to you. I'm sure you'd understand that I'm only learning; and you wouldn't expect too much." Then his face fell suddenly; he slipped his hand into his pocket; the Lady Noggs heard but the faintest jingle of coin; and he stammered: "I—I'm awfully sorry—I—I'm af-f-fraid I can't manage lunch. I—I—have to meet a man."

The Lady Noggs laughed softly. "I tell you what it is, Michael, I believe you're hard-up," she said. "Do you remember how hard-up you were in the old days at Grimestone Square? What a shame it was?"

"Remember? I should think I do! And do you remember that confectioner's, and the splendid cakes he had, and how you treated me to them? Why, I sometimes go to that shop now; but the cakes are not what they were. And I *am* stony-broke. I generally am. Twenty-five pounds comes every quarter. Of course, ten of it goes to my aunt for food and lodging. She said that she might as well have it because it would pay for her shoes and gloves, and I should only waste it. But where the other goes I don't know. Of course, there are the fees; and the stones, the lithographic stones, are dear."

"Well, then, you must lunch with *me*," said the Lady Noggs, rising.

"Oh, b-b-but that's all wrong. You——"

"Of course you will," the Lady Noggs interrupted firmly. "I'm not going to lose sight of you till you've shown me your work. I can't go and see it while I'm starving. Come along. Where shall we go?"

"Let's go to some quiet place," said Michael in a pleading tone. "I expect you're used to the Carlton and the Ritz. Would you like to try a Bohemian restaurant, now—in Soho? You won't like the food, I expect, though the cooking is awfully good at some of them. But the people may interest you."

"I should like it above everything. When one lunches with a painter, one ought to lunch in Bohemia—if he's a real painter," said the Lady Noggs.

They strolled up the Charing Cross Road and turned off into Soho. There they lunched at a busy little restaurant, full of foreigners and English people who looked as if they made a precarious living by the arts and sciences. It was noisy in all conscience; the foreigners seemed only able to lunch at the top of their voices. But the Lady Noggs enjoyed herself thoroughly.

Michael's simple pride in the effect made by her beauty charmed her; it was so naive and sincere.

They had, too, so much to talk about—their common memories of Grimestone Square and Stonorill, his work and his life. He told her of his struggles with his trustee to have his income paid him weekly instead of quarterly. But his trustee, his father's lawyer and friend, cherished a very strong feeling that he ought to learn the management of money, and that the best way for him to learn to spend it with discretion was to go short if he spent it too quickly. The result was that the unfortunate Michael went very short indeed during the last month of every quarter.

The Lady Noggs expressed her approval of the trustee's course, declaring that he was quite right.

"Oh, do you really think so?" said Michael with a sigh.

"Of course I do," said the Lady Noggs. "Why, look at me; I have to slave at learning how to manage money. My uncle makes me take an interest in the working of my estates. I have to check their accounts; and I've always hated arithmetic. I have to look after my investments; and if it's a matter of a mortgage, I have to examine the security myself, instead of taking my lawyer's word for it."

"What a shame!" said Michael.

"Oh, I don't know. I expect it does me good. After all, it's only modern to be businesslike. But I tell you what's wrong with you; you ought to have more money; a hundred a year isn't enough."

"I sell things—sometimes," said Michael.

"Well, you must sell more. But, of course, you will, when you get better known," said the Lady Noggs.

"That takes ages though," said Michael.

They lingered a long while over their coffee; and then they took a taxicab to Grimestone Square. Michael let them into his aunt's house with his latch-key; and they climbed three flights of stairs to his studio.

It was not at all the kind of studio that the Lady Noggs had been used to see on the occasions when she had gone with her uncle into the world of art. The floor was uncarpeted; there were no draperies on the walls; here and there a sketch pinned to them hung crooked; the workmanlike easels were unvarnished; the manifestly shaky table was littered; three windsor chairs and a hard horsehair couch were all the furniture. But she perceived that the room was scrupulously clean and dustless; and she wondered at it.

Michael showed her his work joyously—the

studies with which he had won prizes in art competitions, drawings, a couple of pictures at which he was working, two or three finished pictures. They seemed to her of extraordinary promise; and she discussed them with him with a trained appreciation that surprised and delighted him. She told him how her uncle had had her taste cultivated by the simple process of having experts, artists or critics, take her round the galleries explaining pictures to her, teaching her to understand their qualities.

The lithographs, to which he had been devoting himself of late, took her fancy, especially the portraits. She considered them carefully, and then she said: "There must be lots of people who would like to have portraits like these to give their real friends. I should like to have them myself."

"Let me do a portrait of you—on the stone," said Michael eagerly. "I should do a splendid one —far better than any of these."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door; and a pretty housemaid came in bringing tea on a tray.

"I heard you come in, Mr. Michael, so I brought——" she said, and stopped short, as she gazed at the Lady Noggs with surprised uneasy

eyes. The Lady Noggs understood why Michael's studio was so clean.

"Thank you, Annie," said Michael; and the girl cleared a space at the end of the table and set the tray on it.

When she had gone, the Lady Noggs poured out the tea; and over it they discussed the matter of the portrait. He wanted to do it for the mere delight of doing it; she would not hear of it; she learned that ten guineas was his price for such a portrait, a dozen impressions of it; and she insisted that she should pay him that at least.

Then they discussed whether she should come to his studio for the sittings, or he come to her uncle's house. They decided that she should come to his studio, since he was sure that he would work much better there. Moreover, the Lady Noggs was taken with the idea. She had already a lively interest in Michael; and she felt that he would be so much more himself in his own world. Her visits to it would be all the more amusing for being kept a secret from her friends in Mayfair; and if it were known that she was sitting, unchaperoned, to a young artist, there would be a fuss. She could not see any of her uncles and aunts, by blood or by marriage, viewing those sittings with any favor. But

she was always in revolt against the idea that sh needed a chaperon; here was another chance of ig noring it.

So, therefore, it was settled; and soon after si she left Michael in a delighted eagerness to begi working at the portrait at once. He was goin then and there to order a new stone that it might b at his studio without fail on the morrow.

As her taxicab started, he cried to her, with flush ing face and shining eyes: "It'll be a splendid por trait—splendid."

She drove home, feeling that she had spent a ver pleasant day; Michael's eager face and shining eye kept floating before her mind, and she thought tha she could see her way to helping him.

She was in some expectation of having to endur a scolding for her visit to the Villa Scarlet; but ther was a dinner party that evening, and after it sh went to a dance, so that she had no talk with he uncle. At breakfast the next morning he seeme to have forgotten that she had been away for th week-end, and did not ask her how she had spent it She did not volunteer the information; it was no her way; she had never found that any one gaine anything from unpleasant information needlessl

After breakfast she went round to Huddersfield House; for she was rather anxious about Lady Drippenham, fearing lest she should be taking her loss hardly.

She found the moonlike face of the duchess restored to its wonted serene content.

"So it's all over, Noggs," she said in a jubilant tone. "And I'm awfully obliged to you—awfully. It would have been a shockin' business. How you did it, I don't know; and I expect I'd better not ask, though goodness knows I'm curious enough."

"These things are better not talked about," said the Lady Noggs in the tone of a sage. "How's Anne?"

"Anne's furious—raging. And she's furious with you, talking about treachery and so on. But I don't expect you mind very much; she'll come round all right."

"People do hate being done good to—I do myself," said the Lady Noggs. "But if she's really angry, it's all right. I was afraid she'd be terribly cut up. It's not nearly so painful being angry." And she heaved a sigh of relief.

"That's true," said the duchess. "And Anne will be awfully grateful to you when she comes to her senses. But I say, Noggs, does Errington know you went to the Villa Scarlet?"

"Well, uncle didn't ask me where I'd been, so I said nothing about it," said the Lady Noggs.

"Some one's sure to tell him, and I think I'd better tell him myself and that you went on Anne's account. It isn't fair that you should get a wigging."

"Well, it would save a fuss, auntie; and it would save him worrying between the time he is told and the time he has it out with me."

So it came about that the Lady Noggs got into no trouble for having gone on her mission of deliverance into that suspect quarter of the Surrey Hills.

In the afternoon she went to Michael's studio for her first sitting. She found that he was ready for her; the stone had come; and he had brought up a comfortable chair, with arms, from his aunt's drawing room. He was a long while getting her posed to his liking, but at last he began to work.

As he worked they talked now and again; at times his work demanded all his attention. Every quarter of an hour or so he let her rest for five minutes; and they talked at their ease. In the middle of the sitting they had tea. After an hour and a half's actual sitting, the Lady Noggs said that she must be going; and they had just arranged that she should come the next afternoon, when she learned that she had to wear the same frock at each sitting.

She had never thought of this; and it meant a complete change in the arrangements. She was lunching out on the morrow and had intended to come on to the studio after the lunch. She explained to the surprised Michael that she could not possibly wear the same frock on the afternoon of the morrow; and it was settled that most of the sittings should take place in the morning.

She sat to him the next three mornings and enjoyed the sittings greatly. They were never at a loss for talk. Michael had always a hundred things to tell her of his life in Paris and London, of his dreams and fancies, a hundred questions to ask her about herself. Either had a whole world to tell of, of which the other had but a scrappy, second-hand knowledge drawn from books, and not too many of them. Through all this talk ran an intimate, personal note which made it infinitely more interesting; it began more and more to delight the Lady Noggs to see his eager face light up and his eyes shining as he poured into her ears his boyish vision of the world. She found herself a wise woman, infinitely old and experienced, beside him. The portrait was progressing slowly indeed.

CHAPTER III

THE BLACKMAILER

MICHAEL was depressed indeed to learn that she was going out of London to Salis Court for the week-end, and the more depressed since her engagements prevented her from sitting to him on the Friday; and the Lady Noggs found herself unaccountably put out by the fact that she would not see him for four days.

She could not understand it. She had so many friends that she never found anything distressing in the thought that she would not see this one or that one of them for the next four months. She liked to see her friends, but it made very little difference which of them she saw. It was odd that it should be different in the case of Michael, the latest and least known of them; but she had a curious feeling that she wanted to be in touch with him to look after him. She insisted on paying him in advance half the price of the portrait, that the burden

of hard-upness might be lifted from his shoulders.

Several times on the way to Salis Court she found herself thinking of him with an odd wistfulness. But then she was not driving her motor-car herself; she let her chauffeur drive it, because the first part of the journey, lying through London itself, was too tedious; the second part was beautiful, and she wished to enjoy it undistracted by the anxieties of driving.

As she had expected, she found Salis Court far less delightful than it had been on other visits. Hetty Salis, who had been wont to be first in the light gaiety which gave those earlier visits so strong a charm, moved among her guests, spiritless, broken, gloomy. The gloom of their hostess seemed to infect the whole party; and at times it was veritably dreary. The air seemed heavy with trouble.

On the Saturday night the Lady Noggs was sitting on the terrace, gazing over the stretch of meadows and woodland through which the winding Salis runs. Her mind had been running pleasantly on Michael, his eager charming face; but now her starry eyes were clouded and her brow puckered as she cudgeled her brains for the cause of this saddening change in her friend, and for some means of persuading her to tell her trouble, of helping her.

Presently the sound of a light footfall broke the thread of her anxious pondering; and she turned to find Lady Salis herself crossing the terrace to her. She came to the chair beside her, and sank into it with a weary sigh. The Lady Noggs gazed for a while at her friend's haggard face and the dimmed, heavily ringed eyes she had known so bright, without saying anything. Then Lady Salis sighed again.

The Lady Noggs moved her chair a little so that she faced her and said gently: "What's the matter, Hetty? Tell me."

"Nothing! Nothing!" said Lady Salis, awaking from her gloomy musing with a fearful air. "I —I'm only a little out of sorts—run down."

"Oh, no; that's not it. It's trouble of some kind —I know it is," said the Lady Noggs firmly.

"Nonsense, Noggs! It's—it's nerves!" cried Lady Salis, looking around a little wildly, as if she meant to run away.

"Look here, Hetty, you'd better tell me about it; you had really. I may be able to help, or I may not. But, anyhow, it will be a relief to share the trouble with some one," said the Lady Noggs, catching her friend's hand, and holding her panic-stricken eyes with a steady gaze.

A faint gleam of hope brightened Hetty's woe-begone face; but she shook her head.

"You know for certain it won't go any further," said the Lady Noggs, in her most persuasive tone.

"Yes, I know that. But, oh—I can't—I can't really!" cried Hetty.

The Lady Noggs tightened her grasp of her friend's hand; her gaze grew more imperious; and she said firmly: "Now, you're going to tell me, Hetty. I'm not going to have you wear yourself to a shadow under my very eyes without trying to stop it—so there. Is it jealousy, or money?"

The weaker nature yielded, and Lady Salis said: "It's both—or at least it was both. I will tell you—I must tell some one. I'm being blackmailed; and I don't know what to do, or where to turn."

"Blackmailed? That's bad," said the Lady Noggs gravely; for, for all that she was so young, she enjoyed a sufficient knowledge of the world to have some idea of the gravity of the situation.

"Yes; I'm in a dreadful mess; and there's no way out of it—none," said Hetty hopelessly; and the great tears rolled heavily down her hollow cheeks.

"Don't say that. Let's hear about it," said the Lady Noggs.

"It was six months ago—I think I was mad,"



said Hetty slowly, while the great tears ran down unchecked. "We were hunting—at Melton Mowbray for a month—and Salis began to grow very attentive to a Mrs. Farrer-Molton, one of those horsey women, don't you know. It seemed to grow more and more serious; and I got jealous—oh, you don't know, you can't think what it's like! I think I was mad. And I started to let Hubert Blaizeleigh make love to me——"

"Captain Blaizeleigh! But isn't he a very bad hat?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Yes; but I tell you I was mad. And I wrote him a mad letter. And just after I'd sent it, I found that I'd been a fool—oh, such a fool! There was nothing at all between Salis and the Farrer-Molton woman. And I was so glad and happy—happier than I'd ever been. I suppose it was the reaction. But in the middle of it a horrible man called E. Faithful Magnus came to see me; and he told me that he'd got my letter to Blaizeleigh, and unless I paid him five thousand pounds, he'd send it to Salis. And you know what Salis is; he's awfully fond of me, but if he saw that letter, he'd never forgive me, he'd never speak to me again."

"Poor Hetty. What a wretch this man Magnus must be!" cried the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, he is!" sobbed Hetty. "I've paid him

eight hundred already. And he wants five hundred this month; and I can't get it—I can't—anyhow."

"And if you could, you ought not to; I'm sure of it. The more you pay, the more he'll want."

"I know—I know. But it puts off his sending the letter to Salis; and I want to keep him as long as I can," wailed Hetty.

"What you ought to do is to tell Salis yourself," said the Lady Noggs slowly. "After all, he made you jealous—it was his fault. He can't make much of a fuss about it."

"I can't! I won't!" cried Hetty, in the accents of utter terror. "You don't know Salis! He's the dearest fellow; but if he thought that I had been letting Blaizeleigh make love to me, he'd consider the Salis honor touched and be a perfect fiend. His brother Jim's just the same. It's that horrid Spanish blood and tradition they got from their Spanish grandmother."

"Well, we must find some other way," said the Lady Noggs; and she sank back in her chair thinking hard. Hetty watched her anxiously, but with little hopefulness. At last the Lady Noggs said slowly: "Well, I think the best thing we can do is to send for Tinker."

"Tinker?" said Lady Salis.

"Yes; Hildebrand Beauleigh. He's in the Foreign Office; and though he's so young, they've lately given him a really important post in the secret service. He's awfully good at getting people out of scrapes. He got me out of dozens when we were children. And now he's used to dealing with all kinds of rogues. If there's anything to be done, he'll tell me what it is; and we'll do it."

"But—but—I couldn't have any one but you know. I couldn't!" cried Hetty.

"There's no need. I shan't tell him it's you. I'll write a note to him now, and send it over to him at once. He's staying at the Pointdexters' this week-end; and it's only fifteen miles away. I'll motor over there to-morrow and bring him back to lunch."

"But isn't it awfully late? You'll never get a chauffeur to turn out at this hour," said Lady Salis.

"I pay Gaston extra wages on the understanding that I have a car at any moment of the day or night at five minutes' notice. There'd be no point in having cars if I couldn't have them like that. Come along—we'll find a way out of this mess—we must," said the Lady Noggs, rising.

It was something of a distraction to Lady Salis

to go with her, watch her write the note, and give it with instructions to her chauffeur.

Then the Lady Noggs took her for a long stroll in the woods and talked about Mr. Faithful Magnus to her. She could learn little about him; he had frightened Lady Salis too much at their interview for her to be able to give a useful account of him; she could only say that he was a horrid little man, a loathsome little creature, a detestable little beast, and so forth. The phrases did full justice, doubtless, to Mr. Faithful Magnus' charm, but they gave no insight into his character.

The Lady Noggs brought her back healthily tired and a little cheered by sharing her burden with so hopeful a confidante. She insisted that she should go to bed at once; talked to her while her maid undressed her, and went on talking to her till she fell asleep.

Then, feeling sleepy herself, she went to her own room; and while her maid was brushing her hair, Gaston sent up a note he had brought back from Hildebrand Beauleigh at the Pointdexters' to say that he would be charmed to motor over with her at twelve on the morrow.

At breakfast the next morning she observed that



Hetty had already lost some of her gloom and was less heavy-eyed; plainly for once she had had a night's sleep.

They sat or strolled in the garden till eleven; and then, driving herself and leaving her chauffeur at Salis, the Lady Noggs set out to fetch Tinker. She had allowed herself plenty of time, and about a mile from the Pointdexters' she came round a corner to find him a few yards away, walking to meet her.

At the sight of his tall slim figure, and charming distinguished face she smiled, as always, an irrepressible smile of pleasure. On his face was a smile which matched exactly her own, an irrepressible smile of pleasure at the sight of her vivid radiant beauty. He stepped lightly into the car and shook hands with her, saying: "How are you, Noggs? At any rate, it's not you who are in a horrid mess. Generally when people tell me that a friend of theirs is in a horrid mess, I take it that they're speaking for themselves. But you are of a far too dazzling brilliance to be in a mess."

"No, it's not me. I should have said so straight, if I had been. How are you, Tinker? And how's Elsie?" said the Lady Noggs, setting the car going

"She's a great trial," said Tinker, his sunny blue eyes turning grave. "She refuses and refuses to marry me."

"She does still? It's very wrong of her, seeing that it has been settled ever since we were children that you and she should marry. Is it still the matter of money and being a drag on your career?" said the Lady Noggs with deep sympathy.

"Yes, it's still that. She still persists, though Dorothy has settled twelve thousand on her, that we're as poor as bitter-crying, middle-class church mice, and that ten thousand a year is the least my blushing bride must have to do proper justice to that noble career of mine. But lately she has developed her opposition along another line. She says that we're both so fair and blue-eyed and golden-haired that the sex-law of complemental attraction wouldn't get a fair show, and we should be tired of each other in two years."

"Gracious! She must have been reading books—serious books. Why do you let her?" cried the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, I love to hear her! The golden words of serious science falling from Elsie's pretty lips—well, could anything be more delightful?"

"Yes, you encourage her, of course. And then you wonder that she's obstinate and won't marry you. I really think I shall have to take her in hand myself," said the Lady Noggs gravely.

"I'm afraid it will come to that," said Tinker, smiling again. "It's a drastic remedy—poor Elsie —I shall be sorry for her fluttering in your determined grip. But come, enough of my sorrows. Let us hear of your friend's trouble, and how I'm to help."

On the words his face lost its careless smiling boyishness, and became extraordinarily keen and attentive, the face of a much older man of wide experience.

The Lady Noggs told Hetty's story, without giving her name, shortly and clearly. At the end of it Tinker said: "Yes; it's all there. Generally one gets a bit of the story at a time, but you've got it all." Then he added thoughtfully: "I expect people do tell you things: you have the sympathetic faculty."

Smiling at his compliment, she said slowly: "Well, tell me what to do."

"It's not very easy," he said slowly. "Your friend's in a deuce of a hole. We know E. Faith-

ful Magnus quite well. He was mixed up in the stealing and selling of the plans of the Sheerness forts a year ago, and we inquired into his record. It is of the thickest. We found that he's the true blackmailing genius or thereabouts. Scotland Yard knows it; but, of course, it can do nothing. Swear that you will never reveal a word of what I tell you."

"I swear," said the Lady Noggs without a thought, raising her hand; and they both laughed at her instant mechanical response to the old childish formula.

The Lady Noggs said: "What kind of a man is he?"

"The most respectable citizen you ever saw. But don't let that put you off understanding that he's a tiger. There's one thing, and one thing only, for your friend to do, and that is tell her husband. She's not done anything really serious."

"She won't. Nothing will persuade her to. Isn't there any chance of getting the letter from him?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Not one in a thousand."

"But surely he's got a weak point. I thought these people always had," the Lady Noggs persisted.

"Well, I'll put one of our best men on to him again at once, and have him looked up thoroughly. You shall have the results; and it's just possible you may find the joint in his harness; a woman often does. Indeed, I am always telling my chiefs that we ought to use them a good deal more than we do. Besides, you're cleverer than most, Noggs. That's all I can do for you, get you the facts about E. Faithful Magnus; and I'm sorry it's so little."

"Thank you. I might find the joint, you know," said the Lady Noggs; and she set the car going hard.

The mask of gravity fell from Tinker's face, and the careless smiling boyishness settled down on it again. It seemed to the Lady Noggs that with his coming to the Court the gloom which had lowered upon the house-party lifted. His careless cheerful humor enlivened the other guests; and when he started to motor back with the Lady Noggs to the Pointdexters', he left to the accompaniment of a chorus of regrets. On the way he repeated his promise to put one of the best men in the secret service on to Mr. E. Faithful Magnus in the hope of getting a grip on him; and he added:

"One has to move so gently in the case of brutes

of this kind. It isn't only a matter of cornering him, it's a matter of cornering him so that he has no time to do anything—no time to wreak his spite on the wretched people he has in his power."

"It does make him awkward to tackle," said the Lady Noggs thoughtfully. "He ought to be stamped on suddenly like a black-beetle."

"Exactly," said Tinker.

"But you say that Scotland Yard knows that he's a blackmailer. Why doesn't it stop him? What's it for?"

"It can't move for want of evidence. None of his victims will come forward to give evidence against him."

"Well, Scotland Yard ought to make evidence," said the Lady Noggs firmly.

"Fabricate it," said Tinker, laughing.

After dinner that night she told Lady Salis what Tinker had advised; but she declared that she never would tell her husband, that nothing in the world would induce her to tell him: in such a matter he would prove utterly unreasonable. She knew him, and she was sure of it.

"Well, I shall have to see what I can do myself," said the Lady Noggs.

On her return to town she left Lady Salis in

somewhat better spirits, enjoying some hope that the intervention of the Lady Noggs would get her out of her plight. There was at any rate this much gained, that she promised to stop racking herself to pieces by seeking distraction among the Villa Scarlet set.

The Lady Noggs came back to town in an uncommon eagerness to see Michael again. She came to sit for him on the Tuesday morning in an uncommon lightness of heart, and found him overjoyed by her return. He had so much to talk about that he did very little work on the portrait. He persuaded her to lunch with him at the busy little Soho restaurant, and they lingered so long, talking, after their lunch, that she reached Huddersfield House, to motor down with the duchess to a polo match at Hurlington, so late that it seemed hardly worth while to go.

On the Wednesday morning came a letter from Tinker. It ran:—

"My Dear Noggs,

"I have looked up the *dossier* of Mr. E. Faithful Magnus; and these are the ostensible facts of his life:

"He occupies a position of unassailable respectability at Paradise Villa, Porchester Place, W. He takes a strong interest in local politics, is on the

Street Improvement Committee, and an active member of the Ratepayers' Association. He does his business in the morning by correspondence, and in the evening by word of mouth in the public-houses of Mayfair. He has a large circle of acquaintances among the servants of that neighborhood, from whom he buys most of the information he uses in his profession. He would have an excellent time were it not that his extremely jealous wife makes Paradise Villa anything but a Paradise. I wish I could have found out for you something with more joints in it; but he does look fairly armor-proof. Still you may find the weak spot when you come to consider these facts. As I told you, I have a strong belief in the womanly intuition when applied to these matters, especially in yours.

"Yours ever,

"TINKER.

"P. S.—I am beginning to think after all it might be best for you to take Elsie in hand."

The Lady Noggs smiled at the last sentence. Then she began to consider carefully the even tenor of Mr. E. Faithful Magnus' ways. The facts were indeed discouraging, and the longer she weighed them, the less she liked them; the blackmailer's respectability seemed indeed armor of proof. She weighed every fact again and again, for her eagerness to help her friend was strengthened by a keen desire to justify Tinker's opinion of the value of

womanly intuition. Her pondering was fruitless; she could not see the joint in the respectable armor of Mr. E. Faithful Magnus.

At last there came upon her of a sudden the desire to go and see for herself, a desire that had been frequent in her childhood and had got her into more childish scrapes than she could remember. Tinker had assuredly never dreamed of the possibility of her doing anything so risky. She put his letter in her pocket, went round to the Salis' town house, and was conducted straight to Lady Salis' boudoir.

"Look here, Hetty, I think you'll have to give me a letter to this man Magnus, authorizing me to treat with him about your letter; and I'll go and see him," she said, after they had greeted each other.

"Oh, will you?" cried Lady Salis; then her face fell, and she added: "But suppose he behaves horridly?"

"He won't. Come, write me the letter, and I'll go and see him this very afternoon."

"It is good of you," said Lady Salis, and then she added reluctantly: "But ought I to let you?"

"Oh, I can take care of myself all right," said the Lady Noggs cheerfully. "Come, sit down and write me the letter."

Without more ado Lady Salis sat down, and with the help of the Lady Noggs composed a careful letter appointing her her plenipotentiary.

As she put it in her pocket, the Lady Noggs said: "For goodness' sake don't expect anything from my going, or you'll be disappointed. I'm not going in the hope of doing anything, only just to spy out the land in the hope of finding some way of doing something, So don't you go hoping anything."

"No, no; I won't. But, oh, it is good of you, Noggs!"

"The goodness will come in if I really do do something. If I do pull you out of the scrape there will be some good in it," said the Lady Noggs; and she kissed her and left her.

At half past two she drove away from her uncle's house in her motor-car, wearing a very thick motor veil. The faithful Gaston drove her, and she left him in the car at the corner of Porchester Place with instructions that if she did not rejoin him in half an hour, he was to drive down to the Foreign Office and tell Mr. Hildebrand Beauleigh that she was detained at Paradise Villa. She made sure that he quite understood her instructions, pulled down her veil and walked along the street to the villa, a two-storied house, profusely stuccoed, but of

uncertain architecture. She rang the bell in some trepidation.

The door was opened by a middle-aged maid of a sour ugliness, who, on being told that the Lady Noggs wished to see Mr. Magnus on business, led her through the house to a room at the back, furnished as a study. The window was open, and the Lady Noggs walked to it and looked down into a little garden. In it sat a little man and a large woman, reading newspapers, beside a table on which stood two glasses filled with an amber-colored liquid. Plainly they were Mr. and Mrs. E. Faithful Magnus. Mr. Magnus looked indeed ordinary. Mrs. Magnus did not. Her huge bulk filled the great basket-chair in which she sat, and the voluminous expanse of her shining black silk gown and its black beads and bugles glistened so hotly in the summer sun as to make the Lady Noggs feel hot. The lady's face made her feel hotter. It was large and square and crimson and gnarled. The big, roughly cut nose was gnarled, the coarse heavy jaw was gnarled, the low crimson forehead was gnarled. The pendulous folds of her broad crimson cheeks were set with purple veins. In the middle of the crimson expanse gleamed two savage little eyes. The Lady Noggs had never dreamed of the pos-

sibility of a human being so like a black and crimson rhinoceros.

Then the servant came out of a door below, and said: "Please, mum, there's a young woman come to see the master on business. She wouldn't give no name."

The crimson lady sat upright in her chair; her face grew a deeper crimson; her little eyes shone with a baleful glare, and she said in a deep rasping voice: "What's this, Faithful? What's this?"

"She—she's come on business," gasped Mr. Magnus.

"And what do you mean by doing business with young women?" cried the crimson lady, with frowning fury.

"I do business with all sorts. I have to. You know I do," Mr. Magnus protested, almost in a wail.

"Well, I won't have it! D're hear! I won't have it!" said the crimson lady; and her voice rose to a roar.

"Very well, my dear. Very well, I'll just see her and get rid of her," said Mr. Magnus.

"And be quick about it! If the hussy is in the house five minutes from now, I'll come myself!" roared his monstrous crimson wife.

Mr. Magnus disappeared, and the Lady Noggs caught her breath in a little gasp as a sudden happy thought came to her. Then she laughed softly. She had found the joint in the harness.

The door opened and Mr. Magnus came in. The Lady Noggs' quick eye perceived that he was trembling from his wife's outburst. She perceived, too, that he was the most ordinary man she had ever seen. She had expected a blackmailer to bear some outward sign of his detestable calling, to look toad-like, or sinister. Mr. Magnus carried ordinariness to the extreme; he had an ordinary mouth and ordinary eyes in an ordinary face on an ordinary body dressed in ordinary clothes. He did not even wear whiskers; but he wore the ordinary air of the hen-pecked man.

He said briskly in an ordinary voice: "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"I've come from Lady Salis to treat for the letter to Captain Blaizeleigh. Here's a letter from her empowering me," said the Lady Noggs coldly.

The blackmailer took the letter with fingers that still trembled, and sat shakily down at his desk to read it. The Lady Noggs moved quietly between him and the door. His monstrous wife's voice came booming up: "Be quick, Faithful! Be quick!"

"Yes, this letter's O. K.," said the blackmailer hurriedly, and his ordinary face was suddenly transfigured by a passionate greed. "And you've brought the four thousand two hundred?"

"No, I haven't," said the Lady Noggs coldly.

"Then what do you mean by coming messing here and making trouble in a respectable house?" said Mr. Magnus furiously, but in a low voice. "Five thousand is my price, and five thousand I'm going to have!"

"I'll give you a check for two hundred pounds, if you like to give me the letter first," said the Lady Noggs coolly.

"Two hundred pounds! You're mad! Mad! Five thousand pounds is my price; and if I don't get it within six weeks, I'll ruin the trollop," said the blackmailer brutally; and his face was ugly enough to satisfy the most exacting. "And now, clear out! And don't come here again! I can do business with Lady Salis herself, at my own time; and I don't want any young woman messing about my house, making dispeace. Clear out, and be quick about it!"

The Lady Noggs laughed quietly, and said in a firm incisive voice: "Now, give me that letter at once, or I'll scream."

"You'll what?" said Mr. Magnus in blank surprise.

"I'll scream, and say you tried to kiss me," said the Lady Noggs firmly.

"What? What?" cried Mr. Magnus, almost screaming himself; and he rose on shaky legs, helping support himself with both hands on the desk, and glared at her.

"I'll scream. Be quick!" said the Lady Noggs.

"But it's a lie! I haven't! I'm a respectable man! I wouldn't do such a thing!" gabbled the blackmailer; and the beads of sweat glistened on his brow.

"Yes, it will be a lie; but it will do for Mrs. Magnus very well. Give me the letter—at once," said the Lady Noggs, and she raised her veil and opened wide her mouth as if in act to scream.

"Stop! Stop! Here's the letter! Oh, you devil!" cried Mr. Magnus, in a frenzied desperation; and he unlocked a drawer, dragged it open, snatched a letter from it, and held it out to her.

She took it and read it with quiet deliberation, though there came a roar from the garden: "I'm coming, Faithful! I'm coming!" and an anguished creaking of a basket-chair.

"Go! Go! Get out!" cried Mr. Magnus, who was lying back in his chair, panting heavily.

"Yes," said the Lady Noggs carelessly, as she put the letter in her pocket. "I'm going presently. But first I want a check for the eight hundred pounds Lady Salis has paid you—an open check made out to Felicia Grandison."

Mr. Magnus jerked in his chair, wrung his hands and gibbered at her.

"Hear me scream," said the Lady Noggs, opening her mouth.

The words and action galvanized Mr. Magnus to feverish energy. He grabbed his check-book, and began to scribble a check, muttering with maniacal repetition: "Devil! Devil! Devil!"

"Write it neatly," said the Lady Noggs. "And you'd better not stop it. If you do, I'll send it to Mrs. Magnus with a few words about you."

Mr. Magnus handed her the check, staring at the door in utter terror, and muttered hoarsely, "Pull down your veil! Oh, pull it down!"

The Lady Noggs pocketed the check, pulled down her veil, went swiftly out of the room and down the hall. She caught a glimpse of the Gargantuan figure and monstrous face of Mrs. Magnus, at the top of the staircase from the garden; then, as she opened

the front door, the sour-faced maid bounced out of the room next the study and cried shrilly: "Oh, mum, they was talkin' about kissin'; and the master's gave 'er a check! I listened at the door!"

Mrs. Magnus uttered a stentorian roar of fury; the Lady Noggs slammed the door on the domestic drama she had produced, and ran lightly down the steps. As she walked along Porchester Place, she rocked on her feet with joyous laughter: she knew that even now justice was being done in Paradise Villa.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROOKS AND THE PIGEON

WHEN the Lady Noggs came to the car she stopped to wipe the tears of mirth from her eyes and cheeks; then she looked at the check and found that it was drawn on a bank in the Edgware Road, and bade Gaston drive her to it. She was careful to draw up her veil when she went into the bank, and the money was paid her as quickly as it could be counted. She thought that it would be safer to have it in untraceable gold. Lady Salis could pay it into her bank a hundred or two at a time.

Then she drove to Salis House, and finding that Lady Salis was at home, went to her in her boudoir, carrying the bags of gold under her motor dust-coat.

Lady Salis started up from her chair as she came into the room; and as the footman shut the door, she said eagerly: "Well, did you see him? What did he say?"

"I saw him, the wretched little sweep," said the Lady Noggs, setting down her burden on the table. "And I had better luck than I expected. Now, you're not going to have hysterics or anything of that kind, Hetty?"

"No, no! Oh, what have you done?" cried Lady Salis feverishly, clasping her hands together.

"Well, I've got your letter. Here you are," said the Lady Noggs, giving it to her.

Lady Salis took one glance at it with unbelieving eyes; then in the overwhelming revulsion after the many days of anxiety and dread she burst into a storm of racking sobs.

The Lady Noggs sat quietly down and without a word let her sob for three or four minutes. Then she said sharply: "Hadn't you better get that letter burned and cry afterward?"

Nothing could have pulled Lady Salis together more quickly. Her sobs were checked, though not stopped. With hasty, trembling, fumbling fingers she struck a match; set fire to a corner of the letter; laid it on the hearth; moved it this way and that till the fire had consumed every scrap of it. Then she set her little foot on the charred curled-up sheets, and ground them to powder.

She crossed the room quickly to the Lady Noggs,

threw her arms round her neck, and kissing her, cried: "Oh, Noggs, I can never repay you! Never!" And she went on crying softly and easily.

The Lady Noggs did not interrupt these relieving tears for a while, though they made her uncomfortable; but at last she said: "There, you're all right now, Hetty. And look here, you'd better lock this money away. I made the little beast disgorge the eight hundred he had off you."

"However did you do it?" said Lady Salis, staring at the money-bags.

"Ah, that's a secret—a secret service secret. I had a happy idea." The words brought into her mind a picture of an ordinary, anguished little man being severely mauled by a big rhinocerous-like woman; and she lay back in her chair and laughed again till the tears filled her eyes.

"Never again will a young woman be admitted into Paradise Villa. But come, lock up that money. If Salis came in, it might be a little awkward to explain what you were doing with such a lot in gold. And I tell you what, don't pay it into your bank in a lump. Pay it in a couple of hundred at a time. There's no use in taking any chances. The little Magnus beast looked greedy enough for anything.

Of course, I may have frightened him too much for him to try to get it back; but I may not. He may make trouble."

Lady Salis locked the money away in a cabinet, and promised to follow the instructions of the Lady Noggs. As it turned out, they were unnecessary. Mr. E. Faithful Magnus cut his losses.

The Lady Noggs saw the money locked away, and took her leave of her friend. Even already relief and joy had smoothed the haggard lines out of Lady Salis' face, and a new light was shining in her eyes.

Later in the afternoon, at a garden party at Marlborough House, the men who, as usual, thronged about her, were several times beyond measure surprised by the Lady Noggs, for no reason that they could see, bursting into a sudden joyous laugh. They took it hard that she would not tell them the exquisite joke.

Once she said: "Have you ever seen a woman like a crimson rhinoceros?"

They declared one and all that they had not.

"It's a painful sight; but it has its amusing side," said the Lady Noggs.

The next morning, to Michael's extreme disap-

pointment, she kept him hard at work at the portrait. He wanted to talk to her of a hundred things, as usual; but she would not have it.

"No," she said, when he rebelled. "You must work, and work hard. I have an idea for getting you lots of work and making you quite rich. This portrait of mine is the beginning of it. You've got to work at it and get it finished. I don't like your being hard-up."

Michael did not sulk; but for a while he addressed himself to his work with the air of a child whose feelings have been hurt; and the Lady Noggs felt very like a fond mother who has had to constrain her offspring to perform some irksome duty. But she did not relent; and after a while, as his work gripped him, he lost the hurt air in his absorption in it.

When, however, the sitting came to an end, and his work for the morning was done, she lingered on; and they talked their fill. All that week she kept him at work steadily; and the portrait was progressing. He would not let her see it.

She was eager to reward him for this industry, and during one of their talks she made the amazing discovery that he had never in his life been in a motor-car. Here was a way of rewarding him, and

she invited him to come on a long motor ride with her on the Sunday. He was enchanted.

There was doubtless some danger that the fact that she had been motoring round the country with a young man, a stranger to her family, might come to the ears of her uncles and aunts, with the result of a family council and a considerable fuss. But there was very little danger. Her hatred of cheap notoriety had made her refuse steadfastly to allow her portrait to be published in the illustrated papers; and she was uncommonly quick to observe the presence of a snap-shotting photographer and spoil his aim. This course of conduct had brought it about that her face was not the common property of the world, so that her movements about it were not continuously and uncomfortably advertised. At the same time the consideration that here might be a fuss advised her that the sooner she introduced Michael to Lord Errington and the duchess, the better it would be. After all, the relations of a girl of eighteen who will presently enjoy forty thousand a year, can only be expected to take a keener interest in her friendships than the relations of less gifted girls in theirs. But she proposed to have the portrait safely finished before she made the intro-

At ten on the Sunday, with the faithful Gaston and a hamper in the tonneau of her biggest motor-car, she called for Michael, and they set out on their journey. They had all the day before them; the Lady Noggs was too tender-hearted to take any risks of running over children or animals, and never played the road-hog or allowed her chauffeur to play that part. The car sped smoothly and noiselessly on at some eighteen miles an hour, slowing down for villages. Michael was like a child on a holiday, enjoying the pleasant sense of swift motion, the sunlit country and, above all, the delight of enjoying them with her.

They made a picnic lunch near Lympne Castle, with the expanse of Romney Marsh stretching beneath them, and beyond it the shining sea. The Lady Noggs had given instructions about the hamper herself, and Michael had never enjoyed such a lunch before. They drank about a third of the bottle of champagne; and the faithful Gaston finished the rest very comfortably. The Lady Noggs had not forgotten to bring some excellent cigars. Gaston made them coffee over a spirit-lamp.

They made no haste after lunch to start again on their journey, and when they did they went down through the marsh, and ran along the coast. Two

or three times they stopped the car and went down on to the beach. At Hastings they had tea; and presently they turned inland and reached Lewes in time for dinner. They dined leisurely; and it was nine o'clock when they came out of the hotel to drive to London.

The Lady Noggs had had enough driving for one day, and she preferred Gaston to drive at night, though on that night there was a bright moon. The day in the open air had turned Michael dreamy, and their talk was fitful and broken by long spells of silence. Midway Michael took her hand; and she did not withdraw it from his clasp. It was pleasant to feel it in his. When they talked, they hushed their voices.

It was not till they ran into the lighted streets of London that she drew her hand away, and they both sighed.

"It's been a delightful day—a day of a lifetime," said Michael.

"Yes; we have enjoyed it," she said.

She dropped him at Grimestone Square; and it was nearly twelve o'clock when she reached home. Her uncle was out of town; and she went straight to bed.

Through the next week she sat to Michael every

morning, and since she kept him steadily at work on it, the portrait was finished on the Friday. His studio was a very pleasant quiet backwater out of the stream of her busy life. He was going to print the portrait in the press of one of his friends; and it would take two or three days. Since she was going out of town, he would devote Saturday and Sunday to it. He had caught some of her eagerness that it should be finished quickly that she might raise on it, as on a foundation-stone, the edifice of his fortunes.

They had finished talking about it, and she was on the point of going, when his face suddenly fell and he cried: "I never thought of it. Now that this portrait is finished, I shall see no more of you, or at least next to nothing. Oh, this will never do!"

"Oh, yes; you will. I'm going to look after you, you know, and see that you grow rich and famous," said the Lady Noggs, smiling.

"That won't be at all the same thing. I shall only see you once a week or so," said Michael in a dejected tone.

"We might make it oftener than that," she said, smiling again.

"I'm so afraid that if it isn't often and often, I shall disappoint you with my work. The stimula-

tion gone, I shall do less of it; and it won't be so good," said Michael; and she could see that he really thought it.

"Often and often? That's a great deal to promise. Consider how busy I am; think of my heaps of engagements," she said, teasing him.

Michael said nothing for a while; he seemed to be thinking; then he said: "I tell you what I can do. You can send me a list of your engagements—dances, and that sort of thing—and when I feel that I must see you, I'll come and watch for you going in. A glimpse of you will be refreshing; and you can go in slowly so that I can get a good look at you. That way I shall still get some of the stimulation. But it's a great pity that you are such an awful swell."

"You're a dear boy," said the Lady Noggs, laughing. "But why shouldn't you come to those dances? I have no doubt that I could have you invited to most of them."

"That would be splendid," cried Michael, his face all aglow again. "As soon as my quarterly money comes in, I'll get myself a new dress suit—everything all right. The one I have wouldn't do. Oh, it'll be splendid. But I suppose I had better learn dancing. I never have."

"Oh, you needn't bother about that. We want to talk, not to dance," she said quickly; for above all things she hated to be guided by the inexpert through what are sometimes called the mazes of the waltz.

"That's all right. It *will* be splendid," said Michael.

On her way home the Lady Noggs made up her mind that she certainly would see no less of Michael now that the portrait was finished; on the contrary, she would see more of him. She was not given to self-analysis; it was an art she practised very seldom indeed. After all, self-analysis is one of the children of idleness, and she led a very busy life. But as she went she strove to analyze his charm for her; and it seemed to her that not only did he excite her desire to look after him and mother him, but also that with him she was so much more a girl, and consequently so much more light-hearted. It struck her that the denizens of the polite world were mirthful enough, but not light-hearted; that the task of getting all the pleasure they could all the time was somewhat wearing, and made the young among them older than their age. She thought of Tinker and Michael; there was a difference of perhaps two years between them, yet Michael at forty would not



be so old as Tinker was now. Tinker never could grow any older, really; Michael would. In touch with Michael's eager boyishness, his fresh and hopeful vision of the world, she felt many of her own acquired and probably unnecessary worldly years fall off, she felt herself really a girl. She liked the feeling; she told herself that it was good for her, and she meant to feel it as often as she could.

Somewhat exhausted by these profound reflections, she was glad to abandon herself restfully to the hands of her maid, who dressed her hair for lunch in a very soothing fashion.

In the middle of her toilet the duchess came into the room, the unfortunate angle at which her hat was tilted over her circular face suggesting that she had put it on in a hurry.

"Oh, Noggs, will you come down with me to the Henley-Talboys' place, Ashow Grange, for the week-end? Huddersfield has let me down shamefully. He promised to come with me, and now he says he can't. He says that there's a conference of the leaders to-morrow night, and that he must be present at it. I'm certain he arranged it just to get out of going to Ashow Grange. It's too bad of him. I just help that woman along because Henley-Talboys is a cousin of sorts, to oblige Huddersfield,

and he shirks doing his share. The woman is just impossible."

"I always think her well-meaning enough," said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, well-meaning! Yes. Of course, every one's well-meaning—hang them," said the duchess. "But the Henley-Talboys woman has the worst knack of getting the wrong people together of any one I ever heard of."

"It's genius, not a mere knack," said the Lady Noggs.

"Yes, genius—that's the word. She had the Sandys de Carterets sitting next to each other at dinner five days after their divorce—five days! I give you my word. And the long and short of it is, I won't go unless you'll go with me and stand by me. I don't know who mayn't be there. And if I don't go, Huddersfield will be just infuriated about it. That wouldn't matter, only Edward has some debts he wants paying; the poor boy has been getting into a mess with a chorus girl, one of this dreadful new superior kind, the daughter of a suburban colonel, and she has to be bought off, or it means a breach of promise case. I can't get the poor boy to understand that chorus girls are not what

they were. Oh, you must come with me, Noggs!"

"I was going down to Stonorill with uncle. I ought to go. I haven't been down for a month; and if I don't go down and look after him he lets everything get out of gear," said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, I'll square it with Errington," said the duchess quickly.

"Well, I suppose I must. But I should have liked the quiet time at Stonorill. The pace will be pretty severe at Ashow Grange, I suppose; and somehow or other I can't sit still."

"It's really awfully good of you," said the duchess, with a deep sigh of gratitude.

"But there's Ermyntrude," said the Lady Noggs, looking at her maid. "Ermyntrude has been looking forward to going to Stonorill all the week, for reasons not unconnected with an affair of the heart." Ermyntrude blushed and smiled. "She must go to Stonorill, and you must find me another maid."

Ermyntrude murmured gratefully: "Thank you, my lady."

"Oh, you shall have Briggs. Briggs is always grumbling that I'm such an old frump that she can make nothing of me, though she doesn't put it quite like that. We'll see what she can do."

"If you please, your ladyship, I don't mind not going to Stonorill this week. Later will do quite well. I would rather go with your ladyship," said Ermyntrude quickly.

The Lady Noggs looked at her and smiled: "I wonder if you pester Hopkins with your jealousy as you do me," she said. "If you do, he can't find the path of true love very smooth. No, no; you will go to Stonorill and enjoy love's young dream. And that's settled."

Ermyntrude looked as if she did not know whether to look happy or unhappy.

The Lady Noggs and the duchess motored down to Ashow Grange together, and arrived at six o'clock. They had tea in the boudoir between their two bedrooms, and after it the duchess slept and the Lady Noggs read *La Chartreuse de Parme* till it was time to dress for dinner.

When they came into the drawing-room together they found that in her choice of guests to meet the duchess, Mrs. Henley-Talboys had achieved one of the most signal triumphs of her curious genius: among them were the Countess of Dubbington and Sir Frederick Orge.

Either of them, singly, could, with a notable lack

of effort, impart a pot-house flavor to the conversation of any gathering in which he or she chanced to be. Together they ran riot. Moreover, their co-operative success at bridge was notorious to a degree which prevented intelligent persons sitting down to play with them unless a meal had inspired into them a rare sanguine foolhardiness.

It was something of an offset to them, at any rate to the Lady Noggs, to find Tinker also among the guests; and she spent a good deal of the evening very pleasantly with him in the gardens.

They both of them had a few kind words to say about the Countess of Dubbington and Sir Frederick Orge; and they said them at considerable length. If the ears of that precious pair were not burning, it was no fault of the Lady Noggs or of Tinker.

When they had done full justice to the theme, the Lady Noggs said: "How's Elsie? I've seen her at two dances this week, but I didn't get a word with her. One never does get a word with a girl except, of course, at the Opera; and often I want to listen to the music, unless it's one of the cheap operas and only Melba in it to listen to. Is Elsie relenting?"

"No," said Tinker gloomily. "She's working

the law of complemental sex attraction for all it's worth. She says we should be bound to quarrel with each other in a year or two. Of course, it's only a red herring to put me off the trail of her real reason, which is my splendid career."

"I expect that is what it is. But what is the law of complemental sex attraction?"

"Oh, it means that fair people have a lasting attraction for dark people, tall people for short, hooked-nose people for people with turned-up noses, and so on. And all the other kinds of attraction don't last; they're just passing ones," said Tinker with some irritation.

"I see," said the Lady Noggs thoughtfully. "It must be awfully hard work arguing against a scientific law. Elsie is really very clever."

"Oh, she is," said Tinker.

"I shall certainly have to talk to her. But come along; let's go and look at the bridge for a bit. There's something the matter with that silly little Sissie Alloway. I want to take at look at her."

"She looks uncommonly like a silly little ghost," said Tinker.

The duchess had already gone to bed; and the Lady Noggs had no chance of a word with her till after breakfast, when she found her sitting alone

on the Cedar Lawn with the Sunday papers all around her.

She knew that she must be in a state of uncommon distress to be reading, and when she came up to her the duchess wrung her hands and cried: "Did you ever hear such people? Even in the morning—at breakfast! Such appalling vulgarity really makes the house no place for young girls like you and Miss Alloway! I do wish I hadn't asked you to come, Noggs."

"Oh, I shan't hurt," said the Lady Noggs cheerfully. "I don't listen to them. Whenever they open their mouths, I shut my ears and talk to Tinker. And Sissie Alloway is really too much of an idiot to take harm from anything."

"I hope so, I'm sure," said the duchess heavily.

The vivid glowing beauty of the Lady Noggs clouded slowly with a serious gravity, and she said: "But I am afraid that she's taking a good deal of harm from playing bridge with them. She's quite a changed girl. She used to be one perpetual, annoying giggle. Now she doesn't giggle at all. I had a talk with her between two rubbers last night, and I could hardly get her to open her mouth, except that nature has already fixed it open for her. But I did learn that she had come along with the

Countess of Dubbington and Sir Frederick Orge from Blaikersleigh, and she'd been playing bridge there. She looks scared out of her life."

"I saw there was something wrong with her," said the duchess.

"It's a shame that those two sharks should be rooking a silly child like that! You ought to stop it, auntie!" cried the Lady Noggs hotly.

"How could I?" said the duchess helplessly. "Cards are so difficult to interfere in; and I don't know anything about bridge—if it were loo, now. And it's no use saying anything to the little idiot. I know that kind of girl."

"Well, then, I must stop it," said the Lady Noggs, frowning.

"For goodness' sake be careful!" cried the duchess: "Card matters are so difficult! But, of course, I'll back you up, if you do, and there's a row."

"Thanks. I'll be careful, and I'll get Tinker to help me," said the Lady Noggs; and she walked on with puckered brow, cudgeling her brains for an effective plan.

She strolled on through the gardens, rejecting plan after plan, and was presently walking along the wall of the rose-garden, drawing near the entrance to it, when she heard the high strident voice

of the Countess of Dubbington on the other side of the wall, saying: "Very well, then; we'll fix a limit."

"We'd much better. We don't know anything about her father. He may be able to pay a lot, and again he mayn't. We'll stop at three hundred—three hundred is as far as we ought to go," said the oily voice of Sir Frederick Orge.

"Very well, at three hundred we'll stop playing with her, and begin to ask for the money. If her father is as big an idiot as his daughter, he ought to be pretty hard-up. The way she played that last no-trumper was the limit," said the Countess of Dubbington; and she laughed, the tittering, cackling, sneering laugh in which her mean base nature seemed to find its most perfect expression.

"We'll just go and look at that new pink rose the gardener brags about, and then we'll go and start a rubber. Mrs. Kussner will make up the four. Come along," said Sir Frederick.

They were passing the entrance to the rose-garden as the Lady Noggs came into it; and the setting of beautiful flowers in which they moved seemed to her to accentuate the repulsiveness of the pair. Lady Dubbington, with thin malicious lips, hard eyes, close-set in a narrow face, sparse ash-colored hair, looked as mean a rogue as you could set eyes on.

Sir Frederick Orge, with his fleshy lips, fleshy nose, fleshy jaw, large red ears, and little pig's eyes, looked a rogue of a more blustering type. His fleshiness was so strong a characteristic that it forced on the beholder the conviction that he was fleshy to the very middle of his soul. Their presence spoiled the rose-garden for the Lady Noggs; and she stopped dead on its threshold.

"Come to take a look at the roses, Lady Grandison?" said Sir Frederick, leering at her. "One of the finest gardens in England. You could make hundreds out of it, if you sent 'em up to Covent Garden."

"No. I was in it this morning before breakfast," said the Lady Noggs.

"Freddy's a judge of roses, though he doesn't look it," said Lady Dubbington, letting a sour eye rest on the Lady Noggs' charming face.

"Every one has some odd taste," said the Lady Noggs sweetly.

"Had you there, Freddy. Te he! Te he!" cackled Lady Dubbington.

"Eh? What? Oh, you're too hard on a fellow, Lady Grandison. 'Pon my soul you are. You mustn't go by appearances. I've got my points," said Freddy Orge.

"Curved points," said the Lady Noggs graciously; and she turned and sauntered away, while Sir Frederick racked his brains to discover what a curved point might be. Presently he expressed with some heat the opinion that the Lady Noggs was an impudent little jade.

Once out of their sight the Lady Noggs quickened her pace and made for the house. She was sure that the talk she had heard had to do with Sissie Alloway, and she thought it well to try to find out more fully how matters stood, before she acted. She went straight to the blue room where the bridge tables stood always ready for any guests who might wish to play; and there, as she expected, she found Sissie, looking impatiently out of the window for players to make up a rubber.

"You're late beginning, Miss Alloway," said the Lady Noggs.

Sissie turned with a start, which showed how jagged her nerves were, and at the sight of her anxious scared face and heavily ringed eyes, the Lady Noggs' heart swelled again with righteous anger.

"Yes, they're very late this morning. It's nearly eleven," said Sissie fretfully, in her childish voice, shaking her fair and fluffy head pettishly.

"How are you getting on at the game?" said the Lady Noggs in her most sympathetic tone.

"Awfully badly—shockingly," said Sissie with a catch in her voice

"I'm sorry to hear that. Why don't you let it alone for a bit?"

"I can't! I must go on! I've lost such a lot! I must get it back! I must!" cried Sissie feverishly.

"But can you stand a long run of bad luck?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, it will turn. It must!" cried Sissie.

"Oh, well—if you can afford it," said the Lady Noggs, with every appearance of indifference.

"But I can't. I've lost ever so much more than I can afford. I've *got* to win it back," said Sissie; and there were tears in her eyes, and her mouth was twitching.

The Lady Noggs perceived that she was longing to relieve her mind of its burden, and she said kindly: "Let's hear about it."

"Well, I'd been winning at a pound a hundred before I went to Blaikersleigh; and I had nearly fifty pounds. But playing five pounds a hundred, I lost all that the first night. And the next day I lost eighty pounds, and yesterday seventy. And I don't know what to do. My—my father isn't



rich, you know. And it was an effort to get the money for me to come to town for the season. But he said I must have my chance like other girls; and he got it. I can't tell him I've lost all this money! I can't! I *must* win it back! I—I—shall drown myself if I don't."

"*Plaie d'argent n'est pas mortelle,*" said the Lady Noggs. "But you won't win it back from players like Lady Dubbington and Sir Frederick Orge. You haven't a chance."

"Oh, don't say that! I *must!*" wailed Sissie, blinking her eyes to keep back the tears.

"You won't. You're in a hole. The only thing to do is to cut your losses. Your father had better pay a hundred and fifty than three hundred," said the Lady Noggs firmly.

"But I can't tell him about it! I can't!" cried Sissie.

"Why? Will he be so very angry?"

"He'll be so—so cut up," said Sissie, giving up her attempt to stem the tears, and dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. Then she turned stubborn, and cried: "I will win it back! It's no good your talking! I will!"

The Lady Noggs said nothing. She walked to a mirror and put a straying curl in its place. Then

she took up a magazine and turned over its pages with absorbed interest. Then she looked at Sissie, saw that the stubbornness had given place to an air utterly woebegone, and said: "Look here, if I get you out of this mess, will you give me your word of honor never to play bridge again for more than a pound a hundred?"

Sissie turned and looked at her with a gleam of hopefulness in her face and said: "Yes. Oh, I will."

"Now just think what you are promising and whether you can keep it," said the Lady Noggs sternly.

"Oh, yes! I can! I will!" said Sissie.

"I suppose you've given those people I. O. U.'s?"

"Yes. Lady Dubbington has one for eighty pounds, and Sir Frederick Orge one for seventy."

"Very good. Don't say you've told me anything, and go on playing," said the Lady Noggs; and she went out of the room.

She went to the smoking-room and the billiard-room, looking for Tinker. He was not there, so she went on to search the gardens, and at last found him on the croquet lawn, practising long shots.

"Oh, here you are, Noggs; have you come for a game? I was just going to hunt you out and drag

you forth. I'll give you four bisques and a beating," he said cheerfully.

"You won't! You couldn't!" said the Lady Noggs with some heat.

"Oh, yes, I can. And I tell you what, we'll play for kisses. I'll lay you three kisses to one I beat you. We're not children any longer, and we ought to play for something better than chocolates."

"Of all the cheek!" cried the Lady Noggs, a little breathlessly, and full of the old childish instinct to get a grip on his curly hair and tug it, she made two quick steps, bethought herself in the nick of time of her years and her dignity, stopped short, and said with honeyed scorn: "What has happened? Are you ill? Why this sudden vulgarity?"

"Evil communications—the house of Henley-Talboys," said Tinker cheerily.

The Lady Noggs looked at him steadily, and said in a voice of grave accusation: "You said it quite easily, as if you often said things like that to people. I wonder what Elsie would say—how she'd like it."

"Well, since she won't let me kiss her, it's quite clear that she wouldn't mind at all, and if she did she would have no right to; and, after all, kissing is no crime, but a pleasant and harmless amusement of a slightly exhilarating nature."

"But wouldn't Elsie mind, just? I can——" said the Lady Noggs, stopped short, and laughed.

"What's the joke?" said Tinker.

"Oh, I've got such a good idea! But—but I'm not going to tell it you," she said.

"All right, be a dog in the manger if you want to. But come along, let's have a game. Four bisques and a beating was my offer."

"No, I didn't come out to play croquet," said the Lady Noggs. "I've got a better game on. I'm going to try to stop that Dubbington woman and that pig Freddy Orge from rooking that silly little Sissie Alloway."

"It sounds alluring," said Tinker; and the boyish carelessness faded from his face, leaving it very alert and keen. "I came here because I thought something uncommon would happen. It generally does at this house. And here it is. But how are you going to do it?"

"I'm going to watch their play, and the moment I see them cheating I'm going to put my foot down. And I want you to help me."

"Bless your innocence! They won't cheat if I'm looking on!" cried Tinker.

"You needn't look on. You can just be in the room to back me up. They won't mind me—they

don't know that I know the game," said the Lady Noggs.

"It sounds feasible. Only be very careful. It won't do to make a mistake."

"I won't," said the Lady Noggs. "We won't go just yet. We'll let them get settled down to it first."

Accordingly they knocked about the croquet balls for a while, and she told him the details of Sissie Alloway's plight. Then they strolled to the house and came into the blue room in the middle of the first rubber. Sir Frederick cast an uneasy glance at them as they entered; the Countess of Dubbington greeted them with an open scowl. Mrs. Kussner, the fourth player, a heavy-looking lady of Hamburg extraction and fabulous wealth, smiled upon them placidly. Sissie Alloway looked nervous.

The Lady Noggs walked up to the table and said carelessly: "Do you mind my looking over your hand, Miss Alloway?"

"Oh, no," said Sissie; and the Lady Noggs drew up a chair and sat down between her and Lady Dubbington. She could not only see Sissie's cards but also had an occasional view of those of Lady Dubbington. Tinker took up a magazine, and leaning against the mantelpiece, looked through it. He had his back to the players, but could just see Sir Fred-

erick's cards in the little square mirror set in the overmantel. The play went on.

Sissie Alloway and Mrs. Kussner had won the first game, a little slam in no-trumps. In the second game Sir Frederick scored the odd trick in diamonds. Then Sissie was dealer and left the declaration; Mrs. Kussner declared no-trumps. Lady Dubbington led the king of spades from king, queen, knave and two others. Mrs. Kussner laid down four aces and the king of hearts. Sissie's eyes brightened and her face flushed. She held the king, queen and three other diamonds and the king of clubs. If the diamonds were evenly divided, she must make ten tricks and win a big rubber. She took the king of spades with the ace, led out the ace of diamonds, then a little diamond and won the trick with her queen. Then she led out the king of diamonds and Lady Dubbington revoked, throwing a little club. Sissie looked puzzled, but led out another diamond. Lady Dubbington won the trick with the knave of diamonds, led out her four spades, and saved the game. Sissie made the rest of the tricks.

"Twenty-four and a hundred above," said Lady Dubbington, scoring them.

"But—but—you revoked," said Sissie.



"I did nothing of the kind!" cried Lady Dubbington.

"You played void to the third round of diamonds and then you won with the knave," said Sissie.

"Nonsense! You're dreaming!" said Lady Dubbington savagely, mixing up the tricks.

"But I had five diamonds. There were three on the table, that's eight. Sir Frederick had two——"

"Nonsense! I followed suit!" cried Lady Dubbington.

"I'd only one diamond," said Sir Frederick firmly.

"Lady Dubbington revoked quite deliberately. I saw her touch the knave of diamonds before she threw the club," said the Lady Noggs in honeyed accents; and Tinker came to the table.

"You've no right to say a word! Bystanders have no right to interfere!" cried Lady Dubbington furiously.

"They've always the right to stop cheating," said the Lady Noggs even more sweetly.

"Cheating?" gasped Lady Dubbington.

"Sir Frederick lied deliberately when he said he had only one diamond. He had the nine and the four. He's far too good a player to make a mistake like that," said Tinker.

Sir Frederick started up, crimson and glaring, and cried: "What do you mean, you infernal young whippersnapper?"

"I never heard of such a thing in my life!" cried Lady Dubbington.

"I only mean that you backed up Lady Dubbington in a deliberate revoke by a deliberate lie," said Tinker, with unabated gentleness.

"By the lord, I'll make you smart for this! I—I'll put the matter in the hands of my solicitor!" roared Sir Frederick.

"I never heard of such a thing!" cried Lady Dubbington, and her strident voice rose to a piercing note. "A boy and a girl to accuse us of cheating! It's monstrous? Monstrous!"

"Yes, it is. And we're going to stop it," said the Lady Noggs.

"You'll repent of this! Don't think you're going to do this kind of thing with impunity!" roared Sir Frederick.

"Oh, Lady Grandison and I are out for a row—as you might have seen," said Tinker lightly. "And we want it full-sized—all of a row it's possible to have. We're not going to let you and Lady Dubbington swindle a young girl like Miss Alloway.

We're going to force you into the courts. That's what we want."

"And we shall begin by having both of you turned out of this house. The duchess knew what we were going to do; and she'll see to that," said the Lady Noggs.

Sir Frederick sat down heavily, and his crimson face grew mottled, as it was borne in upon him that this was no accident, but a deliberate trap. The Countess of Dubbington burst into an impassioned tirade in which she displayed a power of abuse and invective many an honest fishwife might have envied. Her voice ranged shrilly through the whole gamut of the grating, the piercing, the raucous and the strident. Sissie grew pale and trembled as her fury rose from height to height; the Lady Noggs was a picture of frowning disgust and loathing; and at the eloquent climax an appreciative smile of recognition of the artist wreathed Tinker's lips.

When at last breath had failed Lady Dubbington, Tinker said: "Has this deliberate revoking happened before, Mrs. Kussner?"

Mrs. Kussner's cow-like eyes moved from him to the Lady Noggs, and from the Lady Noggs to the Countess of Dubbington as she weighed their re-

spective social importance, and decided that it was the merest wisdom to give vent for once to her bitterness against the people who had so often cheated her.

"Yes," she said in even placid tones. "It's always happening—twice yesterday and three times the day before. Lady Dubbington revoked four times and said she didn't; Sir Frederick Orge revoked once and said he didn't."

"It's a lie!" howled the Countess of Dubbington with the breath she had recovered.

"You be careful what you're saying, Mrs. Kussner, or I'll include you in the action!" said Sir Frederick savagely. "Do you mean to say you knew we were cheating you and went on playing with us? That won't wash!"

"I'm invited here to lose at bridge. If I didn't lose, I shouldn't be invited," said Mrs. Kussner simply. "I can afford it," she added with modest pride.

Tinker and the Lady Noggs exchanged a glance of wonder at this naive revelation of the odd customs of this lower stratum of society, and Tinker said: "Well, you'll be a most useful witness among the score or so I can get."

"Come along, Miss Alloway. Come along, Mrs.



Kussner. We'll all go to the duchess and take her to Mrs. Henley-Talboys, and have these two cheats turned out of the house at once," said the Lady Noggs.

Mrs. Kussner rose with alacrity, her square face beaming at the idea of being brought into such serious relations with the duchess. Splendid visions of a *cause celebre* and her name in the papers among the names of people of such fashion floated before her enraptured mind.

Sir Frederick's forehead was glazed with little beads of sweat, and he said with twitching lips: "Here, I say—wait a moment—perhaps Lady Dubbington made a mistake."

"It seems that you've both made mistakes—deliberate mistakes and plenty of them," said Tinker.

"Don't let's be hasty! Perhaps I was a bit hasty talking about my solicitor and all that," said Sir Frederick somewhat feverishly; and he swallowed a hampering lump in his throat.

"Not at all! Not at all!" said Tinker with quick politeness. "It was the game. But what do you expect us to do? We must have you kicked out."

"Hang it all! What's the good of making an infernal fuss and scandal about a mistake any one might make?" cried Sir Frederick.

"Such a lot of mistakes," said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, we all make mistakes at bridge. Why, I expect you sometimes make a mistake yourself, Lady Grandison," said Sir Frederick, with the sickliest fawning smile. "The—the thing to do is to rectify them."

"Rectify them?" said the Lady Noggs, looking at Tinker.

"Orge means that he and Lady Dubbington will return Miss Alloway her I. O. U.'s," said Tinker quickly.

"I won't! I won't! Return eighty-two pound ten? Never!" howled the Countess of Dubbington.

"You'll do as I tell you!" roared Sir Frederick in a savage voice, finding a relief from his terror in bullying some one. "Do I run this show, or do you? Hand that I. O. U. over at once!" He had lost all caution.

The Countess of Dubbington, overwhelmed by his violence, fumbled in her purse and drew out a half-sheet of paper; Freddy Orge snatched it from her, took another half-sheet from his note-case, and handed them to Tinker.

"Now, you and Miss Alloway are quits," said Tinker, tearing them up.

Freddy Orge nodded sullenly.

"Are you, Lady Dubbington?" said Tinker sharply.

"Yes," moaned Lady Dubbington.

"No, no; you're forgetting this rubber. They haven't paid over this rubber yet. It's a large one. It's—it's 398—twenty-four pounds ten," said the Lady Noggs, with womanly thoroughness; and she held out a marker on which she had scored it.

The two gazed at her with malignant eyes. Then Sir Frederick Orge said something under his breath, took the notes from his note-case and handed them to Mrs. Kussner. Lady Dubbington's fingers trembled as she counted out four five-pound notes, three sovereigns, two half-sovereigns and nine and sixpence in silver, and pushed it across the table to Sissie.

"I—I—owe you sixpence," she said in a heart-broken voice. "It's not worth changing a five-pound note for. I—I'll pay it you this afternoon," and rising to her feet she burst into bitter tears and tottered out of the room. She felt as if her cherished greed were expiring under these two deadly blows.

It should have been pathetic, but she must have just overstepped the sublime, for, as the door closed

behind her, the Lady Noggs and Tinker burst into inextinguishable laughter. They shouted with laughter; and even Sir Frederick grinned. Then, when their laughter had died down a little he said heartily: "Well, all's well that ends well. We made a mistake and we've rectified it in a—in a very handsome manner. I take it you won't go talking about it—not that we've left anything to be said." And he walked out of the room with an almost jaunty air.

The Lady Noggs and Tinker laughed again.

Then Sissie, who had been sitting huddled over the table wearing a dazed air, looked up with a world of gratitude in her eyes, and said: "Oh, I am so much obliged, Lady Grandison. I—I'll never be so silly again."

"Oh, that's all right," said the Lady Noggs.

But Mrs. Kussner, who had had the luscious brimming cup of notoriety dashed from her lips, said sadly: "But it was rather disappointing—no scandal. They should have been made to go into the law courts."

CHAPTER V

STARTING A PAINTER

HAVING brought this delicate affair to this fortunate conclusion, the Lady Noggs and Tinker went out of the long windows of the blue room into the garden.

"Really, you know, we ought to have insisted on a regular exposure and had them turned out of the house, so that no one could with any decency invite them to their houses again," said the Lady Noggs rather uneasily.

"Very few of the people to whose houses they go have any decency; they're all on the social make. But this matter will spread all right, and the fact that they took it lying down will do them more harm than if they'd put up a regular blustering row. But come along, let's go and have our game of croquet," said Tinker cheerfully.

On their way to the croquet lawn, they stopped to tell the duchess of their success.

"Ah," she said in a tone of grave satisfaction,

"it was quite providential my bringing you down here, Noggs."

They went on to their game.

For the rest of the day the Countess of Dubbington and Sir Frederick Orge were little seen and even less heard. She kept her room, weeping doubtless for the lost I. O. U.; and he sat in the smoking-room, drinking whisky and soda in a very thorough and painstaking way, and displaying a somewhat captious humor. At dinner their contributions to the conversation were as inoffensive as they were infrequent. But Sissie Alloway had already so much recovered her proper lightness of heart as to giggle often.

After dinner she followed the Lady Noggs out into the garden and thanked her again and at length. They talked for some time, and the Lady Noggs learned that she was staying for the season with her aunt, Lady Wembley. She knew that lady to be a dull-witted, indolent, easy-going woman, incapable of taking any care of any one. She felt that a silly little girl like Sissie could not be in poorer hands, and as she went to bed that night she cudgeled her brains to find some way of getting her into the hands of a stricter and more wide-awake guardian. She could not find a way.

It was lunch-time before she got back to town on the morrow, and there was no chance of seeing Michael that day; her afternoon and most of the night were filled with engagements. She would have been very pleased to cut one of them to spend half an hour with him; but it was a point of honor with her not to break an engagement.

On the Tuesday morning she motored early to Grimestone Square, eager to see his portrait of her, and even more eager to see him.

Michael had worked with a strenuousness she little suspected at the printing of the portrait; it was finished and ready for her. It delighted her; she had no doubt about its excellence; she had inspired him to a charming piece of work.

She expressed her admiration of it without stint, and at the end of the expression of it she said: "It will be really quite easy to make you affluent."

"Affluent? Me?" said Michael somewhat doubtfully. "You musn't expect me to do work like this every time. This is the best thing I've done. I'm not going to find an inspiration like you always."

"Well, we must find beautiful people for you to draw, till you get so good that you can draw any one. And I tell you what. I'm going to finance

Michael opened his mouth to protest, but she went on quickly: "No; it's no good your telling me that you can't take money from me. You're not going to take money from me. I'm just going to finance you as a business speculation and have six per cent. on my investment; that is, I'm going to lend you money at six per cent. You can't object to that; it's usurious. Besides, I'm not only going to lend you the money, I'm going to see that it's spent so as to bring in a great deal more. It's really no good objecting. I've thought it out, and I'm going to do it."

"Of course, if you've made up your mind," said Michael, abandoning all attempts to resist with a very good grace. "But what is it you're going to do?"

"Well, I don't like your being so hard-up and working in these dismal rooms. I don't believe you work any better for it. I want to make you not exactly a fashionable portrait painter, but to get you enough work at these lithographic portraits among people who can really pay for them, to let you work at your real painting without these bothers."

"It would be splendid," cried Michael, his face all aglow with eagerness. "But how are you going to do it?"

"Well, I want you to come away from here to a nice studio to which people can come, and which would be a pleasanter place to work in. And it would have to be furnished nicely—simply, of course—for you mustn't start burdened with debt. This portrait of me will get you plenty of work to start with."

Michael on the instant grasped the fact that the execution of this scheme would throw them together a good deal, and he said: "It's a splendid idea."

The Lady Noggs looked at him thoughtfully: "Yes," she said slowly, "I think it is. But I expect that it will mean that you'll become a fashionable portrait painter. I think that a good many women will try to spoil you. I shall have to keep you up to the mark in your real painting; and you'll certainly come to dislike me a good deal."

"Oh, no; I shan't, Noggs. How can you say such a hateful thing? I could never come to dislike you," cried Michael in a tone of horror.

"I shouldn't wonder at all if you did, if I had to worry you to work hard at your painting; and I certainly should worry you if you grew slack."

"But you would never have to worry me. I'm as keen on my painting as I am on you—almost," said Michael with triumphant assurance. "And when are we going to begin?"

"At once," said the Lady Noggs. "The first thing to do is to get five of these portraits framed; and you'll have to instruct the frame maker exactly how it's to be done so as to give them their full value. They must be quite right, you know."

Michael brought down the lithographs to the motor-car and they drove to a frame maker. They discussed mounts and frames with serious care, and when they had chosen them, the Lady Noggs gave the frame maker orders to frame five of the portraits, and said that they must be put in hand at once, that she might have two of them on Thursday, and the other three delivered to friends to whom she was giving them. The frame maker said he would do his best, but he did not seem very hopeful of having them finished so early till she gave him the names and addresses of the people to whom they were to be sent. Then he promised to have them delivered on the Thursday without fail.

Before they left the shop the Lady Noggs suggested that Michael had better have some of his studies, drawings and other lithographs framed to hang on the walls of his new studio; and he made an appointment with the frame maker to come to

Grimestone Square next morning, receive his instructions and fetch the pictures.

When they came out of the shop, the Lady Noggs said: "Now, let's go and choose a studio. Where shall we go?"

Michael said that a studio within his means must be sought either at Chelsea or in St. John's Wood. Without any hesitation the Lady Noggs chose Chelsea, by reason of its greater accessibility to Mayfair; and Michael approved her choice.

To Chelsea they went, found a house agent, obtained the keys of half a dozen empty studios and examined them at length and with care. They chose one which had lately been painted and repaired, and was consequently ready for a tenant. They went back to the house agent and arranged terms. Michael could take possession of it as soon as his references had been proved satisfactory.

Michael suggested eagerly that they should forthwith set about buying the furniture, but the Lady Noggs pointed out that it was now a quarter to one, and that she was lunching in Grosvenor Gardens at two, and had to go home to dress. But she said that there was time to go to Coutts' and draw out the money to start him with a banking account; to

Coutts' they went; and she drew out a hundred and fifty pounds in notes.

Before the car started again they discussed where he should bank, and they decided that his bank should not be in Chelsea itself, because it must not be too easy for him to cash a check, nor yet so far away as to make it difficult. It must be at a distance which would give any unwarrantable impulse a little time to grow less fervid. This nice point they discussed with the grave air of ancient sages, and at last they came to the conclusion that if they could find a bank at Knightsbridge, Knightsbridge was the ideal spot. They drove to Knightsbridge and there they did find a bank.

Michael got out of the car and bade her good-by; as was fitting, he wore the serious air of a man about to take an important step in life.

Next day they set about the furnishing of the studio with energy and enthusiasm. They were extraordinarily like a young couple furnishing a home before getting married. They went through the exhausting business with the untiring zest of children playing a new game. They did not choose hastily and at one shop; they explored every likely shop in the Tottenham Court Road; they discussed the pieces of furniture at great length, the table, the

couch, the two easy chairs, and the four other chairs.

They had bought, in the course of three mornings' careful work, these pieces of furniture, and were congratulating themselves on the successful performance of their task, when they remembered the matter of carpets. That meant another morning's work. At the end of it, they remembered the curtains, curtains for all the rooms, and sped to Liberty's. Choosing curtains for the bedroom reminded them that they had forgotten to furnish that room. That meant another morning in the Tottenham Court Road. They had but chosen a pretty bedroom suite, when they remembered the kitchen. They found that they enjoyed an equal ignorance of pots, pans and crockery, and were forced to throw themselves on the experience of the man who was serving them. He took them for a young couple setting up housekeeping, and judging of their means from Michael's somewhat shabby clothes, made the equipment of the kitchen a modest one.

Later they remembered other necessaries, knives, forks, spoons, linen. Their forgetfulness was a source of great pleasure to Michael; every fresh thing remembered meant another meeting with the

Lady Noggs, another intimate discussion with the Lady Noggs. He could have bought most of them himself, but that did not seem fair. She had invented the game, and she must have a full share of it. The only part of the equipment for his new career which Michael chose himself was clothes. She had suggested that he must dress the part of a fashionable portrait painter, and he took great pains with their selection.

The day before the portraits were to be delivered by the frame maker she wrote to the people to whom she was sending them, apprising them of their coming. When the two she had ordered to be sent to Errington House came, she hung one in her boudoir, and next morning she had the other, which she was giving to her uncle, taken down to the breakfast room.

When he came to breakfast he was delighted with the gift; and after he had considered it carefully he said: "Who did it?"

"Michael Broome. He's coming to lunch to-day," said the Lady Noggs.

"Broome? Broome? I don't know the name," said Lord Errington. "Is he one of the younger men?"

"Why, surely you remember him, uncle!" said the Lady Noggs. "He was the little boy I brought away from Grimestone Square to Stonorill on one of my visits to Aunt Caroline."

"Oh, yes; I remember him now," said Lord Errington, without any display of joy in the memory. "So he has become a painter, has he? But—but—he must be a boy."

"Yes, he's a painter; and I got him to do this lithograph of me that you and one or two other people might have a picture of me. You said last year you would like one."

"Yes, and I am charmed to have it," said her uncle.

He looked at the portrait again carefully, and said: "But a boy—he must be a young man of extraordinary promise. You were lucky to find him."

"That's what I think," said the Lady Noggs.

They sat down to their breakfast; and as usual her uncle fell into his dreams, or more probably into some abstruse metaphysical speculation. She kept him half awake to the business of eating and drinking by quiet suggestions in a gentle voice that did not break the thread of his thought.

Suddenly he seemed to revert to an earlier train of thought, and said: "It's a great blessing that you've stopped doing those out-of-the-way things you used to do as a child."

"One grows older, you know," said the Lady Noggs demurely.

Her letters were awaiting her in her study, where her accomplished secretary had already opened and arranged them into classes—business, social, personal and begging. Among the personal were three thanking her for her portrait. Lady Beauleigh asked her for an introduction to the artist, for she wanted him to make portraits of Tinker, Elsie, Sir Tancred and herself. Mrs. Borrodaile asked her for an introduction to the artist, for her husband insisted on having her portrait by him at the earliest possible moment. Lady Salis asked for an introduction to the artist that she might have her portrait by him in time to give to her husband on his birthday.

The Lady Noggs gave her instructions to her secretary about the other letters in a very good temper. She had been justified of her distribution of her portraits; she had not only found six new subjects for Michael, but also six interesting and attractive human beings to draw. She seemed to

have started well in establishing him in the position of fashionable portrait painter.

She went to her dressmaker in a very good humor, and with her she spent the rest of the morning. She came home to lunch rather late to find her uncle's guests and her own already in the drawing-room, most of them grouped about the portrait discussing it, or rather listening to a discussion between Lord Errington and Michael. At the last moment Lord Errington's scrupulous conscience had asserted itself, and he was questioning whether Michael had not strained his medium. Michael was defending himself with his boyish earnestness.

At lunch the Lady Noggs placed him between Lady Bannersdale and Mrs. Stuyvesant-Rennslaer, two wealthy, middle-aged and influential women with a taste for young men. She observed that he made on both of them exactly the impression she desired, that both of them wanted to pet him, that both of them would ask him to make portraits of them. It was plain that he would very soon have as much work as he could do.

At about half past three the party broke up, and the Lady Noggs, who had kept her afternoon free, took Michael up to her boudoir to talk about their scheme. He broke at once into a eulogy of the

decoration of the room, of the half-dozen admirable pictures and drawings on the walls, and the few pieces of bric-á-brac about it, and at the end of it said: "I shouldn't think that taste could go any further in making the exact room for a girl like you."

"Oh, it wasn't my taste. It was chiefly my uncle's. We worked it out together; but most of the suggestions were his. He has splendid ideas and enormous knowledge behind them. Sometimes I grow quite vexed when I think how much time he wastes on that silly game of politics. It was his idea that I must have only a few beautiful things in the room."

"Yes, that's quite right. You should never tire the eye with beauty," said Michael quickly.

"Sometimes he says that there are too many beautiful things in it already. I fancy that mine is a more opulent taste than his. But let us get to business. I had three letters this morning asking for six portraits."

"Six?" cried Michael. "That is splendid! Why, that's sixty guineas to begin with."

"Oh, no; ten guineas is not enough to charge these people for a portrait. They wouldn't really like it. You must charge them twenty-five. That will be just right."

"Twenty-five? Why, that will be a hundred and fifty guineas to begin with."

"Yes; and another thing is, you'll like making portraits of these people enormously. They're all good-looking; and they're all interesting and attractive."

"It does sound splendid," said Michael, almost in a tone of awe.

"I haven't answered these letters yet, because the first thing to do is to get you settled in your studio."

They fell to discussing the few things left to do before he could receive sitters in the studio; and in the middle of the discussion a footman came to say that Mr. Alloway had called and begged for a few minutes' private talk with Lady Grandison.

"That must be Sissie's father. Oh, dear! I'm sure he's come to thank me," said the Lady Noggs in some dismay. "But I suppose I must see him."

With the prospect of work before him, Michael was all on fire to get his studio ready; and he took his leave of her in very high spirits.

The Lady Noggs went to the drawing-room, and there she did find Sissie's father, a fresh-colored old gentleman from the country, with a kindly face, and a manner of a courtliness somewhat out of the

common. He seemed rather taken back by the sight of the Lady Noggs; plainly he had expected some one of a greater age and severity.

He apologized for troubling her, for calling on her without an introduction; but his little girl had written him that Lady Grandison had got her out of a dreadful mess; and he had come to London to learn all about it. He had seen Sissie; she had told him of her bridge misadventure; and he could not rest, really he could not rest, till he had thanked her for coming to Sissie's rescue.

The Lady Noggs received his thanks very prettily, much as she disliked the process; and then over their tea they talked about Sissie. It was quite plain that the girl was the apple of his eye; and the Lady Noggs was sorry for him; she could not see the lucky chance which would save Sissie from making a mess of her life.

"Of course, Sissie's very young," she said at last, knitting her brow as she considered the unfortunate quality.

Mr. Alloway's eyes opened wide in an evidently irrepressible surprise.

"You're thinking that Sissie is three or four years older than I am; and I suppose she is—if you count actual years. But really, you know, it's no

use counting them. I'm ages older than she is; and she never will be as old as I," said the Lady Noggs.

"I suspect that there is a great deal of truth in what you say," said Mr. Alloway thoughtfully.

"Really, you know, she needs looking after. She's so unsuspicious and—and light-hearted."

"Yes, yes; she does lack seriousness. But I shouldn't like her serious," said Mr. Alloway quickly.

"Of course you wouldn't. But Lady Wembley can't look after her at all," said the Lady Noggs, pressing her point.

"I fear not—I fear not," said Mr. Alloway, his face clouding. "But what can I do? I can't bring myself to take the child away from town in the middle of the season. She would be bitterly disappointed. Besides, she ought to have her season in town—the same chances as other girls. I am hoping that this bridge business will be a lesson to her. Sometimes—sometimes I wish she were safely married to some decent young fellow—though I should hate to lose her."

"Yes, that would be the best thing for her," said the Lady Noggs. Then out of the liking she had taken for the kindly old man sprang an idea, and she said: "Will you let her come and stay with

me for a few weeks? I will look after her; and I think I could do it properly. You see, I have a solid phalanx of relations looking after me; they will look after her, too."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Mr. Alloway. "Thank you—thank you a thousand times. But that would be taking a most unfair advantage of your kindness. It would be most unfair that your pleasure in your first season should be spoiled by a tiresome responsibility of this kind."

"But it wouldn't. I should like it," said the Lady Noggs quickly.

Thereupon she set herself to break down his reluctance to avail himself of her aid with a determination to which he was presently forced to succumb. Before he took his leave it was arranged that Sissie should, in a few days, come to stay with her; and he went his way overflowing with thankfulness.

The next morning the Lady Noggs received letters from Lady Bannersdale and Mrs. Q. Stuyvesant-Rennslaer. Lady Bannersdale said that she would very much like a portrait of herself by Michael, and asked her if she would have the kindness to arrange the matter for her. Mrs. Stuyvesant-Rennslaer asked her for Michael's address, since

she wished him to make portraits of herself and her daughter. The Lady Noggs did not answer these letters at once; again she preferred to wait till the studio was ready for sitters.

She showed the letters to Michael; and they discussed seriously the arrangement of his life. They decided that it was most important that he should work at his painting, that he should therefore devote his mornings to it. His afternoons should be spent on the lithographic portraits out of which he was to make his income.

"As for these ten people," he said, "I'll start them all sitting, two of them every afternoon, an hour and a half each. After all, you know, I'm little more than a beginner, though I shall never do a better portrait than that of you. And if I'm working on all of them at the same time, they'll help me to get each other right. By the time I've finished all ten of them I shall really be quite experienced. They've all of them plenty of leisure; and I'm going on working at them till they're all right."

"And then your feet will be on the road to fame and fortune," she said.

"And I shall owe it all to you."

"No, you'll owe it to your work," said the Lady

CHAPTER VI

THE GAY DECEIVER

SINCE Sissie Alloway was about to be entrusted to her care, the Lady Noggs, as she moved about the polite world, kept a watchful eye on her. She was in hopes that she might find that she had already attracted one of the decent young fellows to whom Mr. Alloway hoped to see her married. The discovery which the Lady Noggs did make was far less agreeable. She found that her future charge had fallen in love with Sir George Leuty; and, unless he were much belied, Sir George Leuty was anything but the decent young fellow of Mr. Alloway's desire.

She had quite realized, when she had invited Mr. Alloway to let Sissie come to stay with her, that her insensate silliness would make her difficult to keep out of mischief. The discovery that she was in love with Sir George Leuty trebled the difficulty.

After considering the matter at some length, it

seemed to her that it would be a good thing to take advice about it from her faithful counselor, Tinker. His advice was always worth having; and if she did need his help, he would be able to help her more effectively if he had been keeping a watchful eye on the progress of the affair. Accordingly she wrote to ask him to come to tea with her, for a serious conference, on the day before Sissie came from Lady Wembley's to Errington House.

She had tea set in the garden; and he came across the lawn to her, looking his most debonair. With his tall, slim, admirably proportioned figure, it would have been difficult for his accomplished tailor to fail to turn him out one of the best dressed men in London; and one of the best dressed men in London he was. Yet there was nothing dandified in his air; he lacked the true dandy's consciousness of his clothes, the half-concealed appeal to you to observe how well dressed he is.

At the sight of the Lady Noggs sitting before the little table on which the tea was set out, his careless blue eyes brightened to their sunniest. Then, as they took in her cloudy thoughtful face, their glow dimmed sympathetically.

As he shook hands with her, he said: "Well,

here I am, Noggs—obedient to your summons. What's the trouble now?"

The cloud cleared slowly from her face; and her vivid beauty shone out in all its splendor as she said: "It's awfully good of you to come, Tinker. I know that you're awfully busy. It's that little idiot Sissie Alloway again."

"What has she been up to now? And if she has, why do *you* worry about it?"

"Well, her father learned that we had got her out of that bridge scrape. And he came to town to see me to thank me; and he was such a dear that I offered to have Sissie come to stay with me, and to keep an eye on her, and see that she didn't get into any more messes. And now I've got to. She's awfully silly, you know; and her aunt, Lady Wembley, who is in charge of her, is quite useless. So it all falls on me."

"Yours is a busy life. And what's she done now? Not bridge again?"

"No; that wouldn't be so difficult to deal with," said the Lady Noggs, pouring out the tea. "This time it's an affair of the heart, and, of course, the little idiot has hit on the wrong kind of man, and is conducting the affair in the wrong way."

"She would," said Tinker.

"Perhaps you've noticed it?"

"Perhaps. But I'd rather have your version of it. There's nothing like getting an affair from different points of view, if you've got to deal with it."

"Well, she's fallen in love with Sir George Leuty. And you know what his reputation is. He seems to have absolutely fascinated her. That large and lumpy kind of man always attracts fluffy little idiots like Sissie. And I'm sure he has no intention at all of marrying her. She's just going to be made miserable. Of course, it might do her good—really," she added thoughtfully.

"A broken heart might stiffen her backbone, you mean," said Tinker. "It often does."

"Yes, it might. But she's an awful weakling, really; and there's the risk of its breaking her up, don't you know. And since I've made myself responsible for her, I can't have her made miserable. She's such a harmless little idiot—and she's—she's affectionate."

"I see that she's touched the spot—the soft spot in your heart," said Tinker.

"As if I'd only one!" she cried.

"Well, say you've half a dozen, if you like," said Tinker peaceably; and he drank some tea.

"Well, that's how things are. I want you to tell me what to do—how to stop it."

"I don't think it's a very serious business," said

Tinker thoughtfully. "After all, we've only Leuty's word for it that he's such a devil of a fellow; and for my part I don't believe it. You see, I have never heard of one instance of his proving himself the accomplished Lothario he pretends he is. But all the same, that's his pose; and it is dangerous. Of course, if the chance of acting up to it came his way, he might take it; it's quite probable. Miss Alloway is quite idiot enough to thrust it on him; and there you'd be. She does want looking after—closely. And if you're set on preventing any mischief, you'll have to keep your eye on her all the while. It's a good job she's coming to stay with you. That will make it easier."

"Yes, it will. But it will still take a lot of doing," said the Lady Noggs with a sigh.

"You find affection of the kind she gushes nicer at a distance, eh?" said Tinker, smiling.

"It is," said the Lady Noggs ruefully. "But I'm thinking a good deal more of her father than of her—he's a dear. The worst of it is that Sir George Leuty really seems to exercise a fascination over her—the kind one reads about in books."

"That's what he plays at—the brutal *beau ténébreux* game," said Tinker, smiling. "But you've

got to bear in mind that it cuts both ways. The brutal *beau ténébreux* fascinates the fluffy idiot, and the fluffy idiot fascinates the brutal *beau ténébreux*. In fact, I've watched them together; and I fancied that that was their case. At any rate, you had better be ready to run the show on those lines."

"I will. Tinker, you're a treasure," said the Lady Noggs. And by way of rewarding him, she spent the rest of the afternoon discussing Elsie's refusal to make him happy.

Next day Miss Cecilia Alloway came to stay at Errington House. It was a social advance beyond her wildest dreams; for to be the guest of Lady Grandison houses opened which would have been forever closed to the mere niece of Lady Wembley; and through her mind was overfull of Sir George Leuty, she enjoyed greatly her lofty position. Sir George Leuty regarded her advance with mixed feelings. On the one hand it increased, or perhaps awakened, his respect for her; on the other hand, he found fewer opportunities to proceed with the process of fascination. Sissie was enjoying the gaities of houses to which he was not invited; and when they did meet it was difficult to get her to himself. He suspected that her young hostess put the

difficulties in his way; but she was far too skilful to allow him any certainty. The check increased his eagerness to get on with the process of fascination. Indeed, his extreme eagerness to be with Sissie was really of an intensity quite out of keeping with his impression of himself as a cold-hearted, relentless man of the world, the Chevalier Valmont of the twentieth century.

His appearance was much more in keeping with the ideal he kept before him. He wore the heavy, ironed, black mustache the part demanded. It was hardly a fashionable form of mustache; but to the ideal sacrifice must be made. He was of a large and somewhat clumsy figure, and the lower part of his waistcoat projected unduly, considering that he was but twenty-six years old; it was not romantic; it grieved him sorely; but project it would. His large and somewhat ox-like eyes were as little in keeping with the part. He believed that at times he got them steely, but he was wrong. They should have prevented any one from suspecting that he teemed with the nefarious designs of the ruthless breaker of hearts. His manner, however, was superb; it was of the gloomiest, faultlessly Byronic. The undiscerning world was apt to call it surly: it little knew. His reputation, as the Lady Noggs had

stated, was indeed bad. This was as it should be; for he had spared no pains, by frequent hints of his terrible doings in the way of fascination, to build it up black. Many women believed him to be a seething maelstrom of wickedness. Among them was Sissie, and the belief increased his charm for her. Only the truth had suffered in that building process.

For the first few days of Sissie's stay all went well, so well that the Lady Noggs began, insensibly, to relax a little her watchfulness. In the full swing of the season she had many things to think of besides Sissie. Michael took up a good deal of her time; she had set his feet in the path to fame and fortune, but she did not on that account feel that the task she had set herself, of looking after him, was at an end. She liked it far too much. She made many visits to his studio by way of rewarding him for the strenuousness with which he was working at his painting and the portraits. Moreover, she had also to watch over his progress through the polite world. She was seeing to it that he received invitations to dances to which she went herself; and that meant that she must protect him from boredom by sitting out dances with him and talking to him.

Now Sir George Leuty did not suffer from this diversion of interests. He had nothing to think of

but Sissie. He enjoyed the advantage, which the amiable M. Leon Blum has pointed out as being essential to a man of love-affairs, of being an idler. He could devote an abundant leisure to the consideration of the subject of Sissie; and he did. His annoyance at the curtailment of his opportunities of seeing her spurred his wits to unheard-of efforts. He cast about to find new opportunities with an earnestness he had never given to any purpose in his life before. Presently he perceived that Sissie enjoyed complete freedom from the protective eye of her hostess during the hour before breakfast, which the Lady Noggs spent riding in the park. Further investigation assured him that the trees and shrubs of the gardens of Berkeley Square screened those taking the air in them from the eyes of the inhabitants of the square in a very effectual manner. At the next dance at which they met, he persuaded Sissie to allot that hour to him; and every morning for the next week they spent it together in the gardens of Berkeley Square.

The fresh morning hours, doubtless for some obscure climatic reason, are not the best hours for the love-making of the inhabitants of England. But the gaieties of the season had not destroyed Sissie's

country freshness; and she came to their trysts very charming, her heart all a-flutter with the romance of meeting her wicked admirer in this clandestine fashion. Sir George, owing to his more strenuous methods of dealing with his evenings, came to them less ruthless and more ox-eyed than he appeared later in the day. Thus the process of fascination was continued; but really Sissie, the more attractive of the two at that early hour, had the best of it.

The Lady Noggs remained in utter ignorance of these romantic meetings. She was surprised, indeed, when Sissie, wishing to appear at her best during these early morning hours, began to show a considerable regard for her beauty sleep, and to take pains to get it as often as the necessities of the season made it practicable. This worthy practise gave her hostess a higher opinion of Sissie's intelligence. Then, of a sudden, she found her guest restless and ill at ease. It had been Sissie's practise to chatter continuously about nothing at all, a chatter apparently as irresistible as the singing of a canary, and assuredly no less trying. Now that chatter was but fitful; and she fell into fits of brooding with knitted brow. At first, the Lady Noggs was anxious; but presently she perceived that there

was no gloom or anxiety in her guest's brooding, nothing but pure perplexity.

Sissie was indeed perplexed. Sir George had made another step toward the ideal. The Lady Noggs was dining out on Friday, and after dinner going to a court ball. Sissie had been invited to neither entertainment, and Sir George was pressing her to come to dine with him in his rooms in Mount Street on that night. He pointed out to her how easy it would be to slip round from Berkeley Square to Mount Street, and slip back again before the return of her hostess. The plan appealed strongly to her sense of the romantic. It was all so daring and clandestine; and it would be so delightful to dine with Sir George alone. She agreed to come.

Sir George, though he had no real intention of taking advantage of her folly, went about the world feeling himself the unscrupulous villain of his dream; and Sissie, having promised to come, at once began to repent. Her sense of the proprieties and her sense of the romantic fell into a most unholy conflict with each other. The scheme was delightful; but was it not carrying daring a little too far? If any one did come to hear of it, there would be a terrible row. She put this side of the matter before Sir George; but he would not hear of her draw-

ing back, and laughed at the idea of any one coming to learn of the romantic escapade.

But Sissie was not convinced by his assurances. She went on being perplexed; indeed, she began to grow frightened. On the Friday morning she was so absent-minded and wore such a worried air that the Lady Noggs, sure that mischief was afoot, fell upon her firmly, and by dint of merciless cross-questioning, at last rent her secret from her.

The Lady Noggs was indeed furious. She was responsible for her guest; this monstrous escapade would compromise her as well as her guest; it was nearly as insulting to her as to Sissie. She knew far too much of the world to dream for a moment that it would remain a secret. She was sure that if Sir George could originate such a scheme, he would boast of it. To do him justice, he would not have done anything of the kind; or, to be exact, he would have done his best not to do anything of the kind. But the Lady Noggs saw Sissie's character irretrievably damaged; and she herself would have failed Mr. Alloway most miserably.

She did not, however, let Sissie perceive how angry she was; she had a very good control of herself. She told her to say nothing of the matter to any one else, and in the afternoon they would dis-

cuss it further and decide what to do. Then she went to her boudoir, and was in the very act of writing a letter to Sir George Leuty, in which she was by no means displaying a reticence with regard to her feelings about him, when she changed her mind, tore up the letter, and sent a wire to Tinker, begging him to come to lunch on urgent business.

He came to lunch; and after she had despatched Sissie to Hurlingham in the care of the Duchess of Huddersfield, with strict injunctions neither to tell Sir George Leuty, if she met him there, that she had told her of their tete-à-tete dinner, nor that she was in any doubt about coming to it, she took Tinker up to her boudoir and laid the matter before him, dwelling at some length on her opinion of Sir George.

"It is too much of a good thing," said Tinker gravely. "Would you like me to go round to his flat and lay the sweep severely out?"

"No, that wouldn't do at all. Evidently he is a sweep; and if it came out that you had thrashed him, he might tell why you had done it; and then Sissie would be in a hopeless mess, and I could never look her father in the face. I should have let him down horribly."

"Oh, no; Leuty wouldn't do that," said Tinker

quickly. "Indeed, I doubt very much that there's really any harm in this dinner. Of course, if a man sets up to be a devil of a fellow, this is the kind of thing he'll do."

"That's all very well. But even if there's no real harm in it, think of what a hopeless mess Sissie would be in if it did come out. And then the cheek of it—inviting a guest of mine to dine with him alone in his flat! It's monstrous. And I'm going to make Sir George Leuty sit up as he never sat up before. I'm going to teach him to play games with my guests. I've got an idea for dealing with him—an idea for killing two birds with one stone, if only it can be worked. And I want you to help me."

"Right you are," said Tinker. "Nothing would please me more than to damp this gay deceiver. I want to do him good."

The Lady Noggs unfolded her plan; and when he had heard it, Tinker laughed loud and joyously.

"Oh, this is splendid! It's—it's eighteenth century of the best," he cried.

"Yes; but can it be worked? Is it legal?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, I think so—I think so," said Tinker.

"Well, we shall have to be quick about it. We haven't much time," said the Lady Noggs.

With that she hurried into her room, came out of it in less than two minutes with her hat on; and they hurried down to her motor-car which was awaiting them at the door. She bade the faithful Gaston drive to the house of the Dean of Belgravia, that stern censor of the manners and morals of the Society in which he is so popular a figure.

They were lucky enough to find him at home. He was charmed to see them, for he was a friend of both of them; and when they had laid the matter before him, and the manner in which they proposed to deal with it, he not only entered into an alliance with them with all the will in the world, but also he gave them most useful information how to carry out the first part of their plan.

They left him after they had acquired this information, and drove to the Lady Noggs' bank. There she cashed a check.

From the bank they drove to a Government Office; and by some accident or other they left the venerable official with whom they did business under the strongest impression that the name of the Lady Noggs was Cecilia Alloway, the name of Tinker, Sir George Leuty. This could scarcely have been their fault; it must have been one of those

senile delusions so common in the minds of venerable officials.

The Lady Noggs dropped Tinker at his flat and came back to Errington House. She found Sissie returned from Hurlingham, and to her great joy told her that she might keep her engagement to dine with Sir George Leuty. But she charged her with such impressiveness not on any account to let him dream that she had been informed of the romantic escapade, that she felt that she had frightened her into keeping her mouth shut. She even went so far as to superintend Sissie's toilet for the meal and saw to it that it was the prettiest and most elaborate her wardrobe held. Sissie let her have her way, though she herself had intended to go dressed very simply indeed.

Then the Lady Noggs dressed in her turn. But instead of going to dine at Huddersfield House with the duchess, as had been arranged, she drove in her motor brougham to the Ritz, where she found Tinker and the Dean of Belgravia awaiting her; and there they dined.

To judge from their laughter, it was a pleasant meal. But with the coming of the coffee a certain seriousness fell on them; and when they left the

table they walked out of the hotel with the grave air of persons engaged in some momentous enterprise. The Dean carried a large, ledger-like volume under his arm. The motor brougham awaited them; Tinker bade the chauffeur drive them to Mount Street; they got in, and it started.

"The avengers are on the trail," said Tinker cheerfully.

"The avenger," said the Dean. "In this instance the forces of retribution are represented by Lady Grandison. I think that she may be trusted to ply the scourges of the Furies with sufficient severity."

"I mean to try," said the Lady Noggs firmly. "I shall have to be pretty firm with him to get him to do what I want. Of course, I may not bring it off; he may turn stubborn."

"I don't think so. I think he is a man to be rushed; and I'm pretty sure that you will rush him all right," said Tinker.

"I'm sure of it," said the Dean, with conviction. "In fact, I should feel sorry for the misguided young man were you not acting for his good. But it has just occurred to me that it might be wiser for me not to appear on the scene till this rushing process has been completed. It will give it less of an appearance of an attempt to force him into well-

doing. Of course, if the thunders of indignant womanhood and the outraged hostess fail, I shall be very pleased to try the thunders of the Church."

"I think you are right," said Tinker. "I shan't take any active part in the business. I shall merely be Lady Grandison's attendant."

"Yes; perhaps it would be better if we did not make it too plain that we were rushing him," said the Lady Noggs.

"Then I'll wait in the brougham," said the Dean.

The brougham stopped before the door of the block of flats in which Sir George lived. The Lady Noggs and Tinker got out of it, and leaving the Dean to smoke his cigar in peace, went up the stairs. Tinker knocked gently at the door of Sir George's flat; and the moment it was unlatched he thrust it open with a force which sent Sir George's man flying, and entering, held it open for the Lady Noggs. At the sight of her the surprised servant hushed the protest on his lips, and stood still. Tinker had been so swift and deft that there had been scarcely any noise; and Sissie's careless laugh rang out from a room across the hall.

Tinker opened the door of it; and the Lady Noggs sailed in, her gown and coroneted hair gleaming splendidly with the Grandison diamonds, her

beautiful face ablaze with the furious righteous indignation of an avenging angel.

The two romantics were sitting over their coffee, smoking cigarettes, smiling at each other across the table.

"What does this mean?" cried the Lady Noggs, in an imperious ringing voice.

Sir George Leuty, dashed suddenly from the dizzy height of his triumphant sad-doggishness, stared at her open-mouthed, aghast, his ox-like eyes starting from their sockets.

"What does this mean?" cried the Lady Noggs again.

Retribution was upon him, and in the suddenness of it Sir George found that his startled brain had hopelessly mislaid the cold, brazen, sneering attitude he had always proposed to wear finely should his villainy be detected.

"What does this mean?" cried the Lady Noggs for the third time, gazing at him with the stern piercing eyes of an accusing angel.

"Oh—er—I—I—er—er," murmured Sir George faintly, and his ox-like eyes began to roll distractedly in their sockets.

"How dare you entice a guest of mine into this disgraceful situation?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Not at all—not at all—I—er—er," said the unhappy man.

"But you have! And how dare you?" cried the Lady Noggs.

"I—I—er—er—I'm not a conventional man—I—I—don't believe in it," said Sir George wildly; and the perspiration shone on his brow.

"It's scandalous! It's disgraceful! It's shameful!" cried the Lady Noggs yet more vehemently.

"Th—th—there's no harm d—d—done," said Sir George, grabbing up a napkin and dabbing his brow.

"No harm!" cried the Lady Noggs. "You deliberately ruin a young girl's reputation; and you say no harm's done, you miserable blackguard!"

"No—no—er—no," muttered Sir George.

"And it is my guest—mine—whose reputation you've ruined."

"B-but n-n-no one will know," stuttered Sir George.

"Oh, come, that won't wash you, you know, Leuty," said Tinker.

"Every one will know! It will be all over London to-morrow! It's disgraceful—shameful!" cried the Lady Noggs. "Come along, Miss Alloway, I will take you back to Lady Wembley at once. If you will let a miserable blackguard like this lure you

into disgraceful folly of this kind, I can't take the responsibility of being your hostess any longer. Come along at once."

The utterly scared Sissie burst into tears and wrung her hands.

"G-George isn't a m-m-miserable b-b-blackguard!" she sobbed. "I—I won't have you s-s-say such b-b-beastly things about him. B-b-besides, I t-t-told you——"

"Come along at once!" said the Lady Noggs sharply, cutting short the revelation.

Sir George sprang to his feet and put his arm round Sissie's shoulders.

"I'm not a miserable blackguard at all!" he bellowed, infuriate, hurling his ideal to the winds. "My intentions are honorable—perfectly honorable! We—we're engaged to be married! So there!"

"Oh, yes; you say that now," said the Lady Noggs with the bitterest scorn. "To-morrow morning you'll be boasting to your friends how you took advantage of this unfortunate girl's trusting folly; and to-morrow afternoon you'll be off to Africa, or the Rockies, to shoot big game till people have forgotten your blackguardly behavior."

"I shan't! I shan't! I'm going to marry Miss



Alloway! I'd marry her here—now—this instant if I could!" roared Sir George.

"Nonsense!" said the Lady Noggs with unabated scorn. "You say that to smooth over an awkward situation. You don't mean a word of it."

"I don't! I do! I would marry her here and now. There's nothing I'd like better," roared Sir George.

"Very good: I'll take you at your word. You shall marry her here and now. Fetch the Dean, Tinker," said the Lady Noggs in a voice that had fallen quiet and businesslike.

Tinker went briskly out of the room.

Sir George and Sissie stared at the Lady Noggs with unbelieving eyes; and then they stared at each other.

A fine blush mantled Sissie's cheeks; she checked her sobs and stammered: "B-b-but——"

"We want the middle of the room cleared," said the Lady Noggs, cutting short her remonstrance. "Push the table back, Sir George. Sissie, stop that crying! Dry your eyes! you're making yourself look hideous. Besides, there's nothing to cry about. You like romance; and you're getting married in the most romantic way one has got married for ten years. Here! Where's the wine? Oh, there's ben-

edictine. Push the table back, Sir George, and give her a glass of benedictine. Be quick!" Her voice was insistent and compelling; she stamped her foot.

Confused by the sudden calm after the sustained clamor of the scene, driven by the Lady Noggs' compelling voice, without stopping to think what was about to happen, Sir George sprang to do her bidding. He drove the table back against the wall with a violence which shattered most of the glasses on it. He spilled the benedictine pouring it into the glass; he spilled it again handing the glass to Sissie; he smeared his fevered brow with the spilled liqueur, as he pressed his wet and sticky hand to it.

Sissie tried to sob and drink at the same time, and choked. The Lady Noggs was thumping her on the back vigorously when the Dean entered.

He greeted the happy but muddled pair urbanely, and took his stand on the hearth-rug, prayer-book in hand.

Tinker seized Sir George; the Lady Noggs gripped Sissie; and they wheeled them into position before him.

The Dean wasted not a moment; he began to read the marriage ceremony at once. In a horrid daze, hardly knowing what they were doing, the bride and bridegroom made the required responses

mechanically at the prompting of the Lady Noggs and Tinker. Sir George never saw where the ring came from he slipped on Sissie's finger. They had the very dimmest notion of what was happening before the Dean pronounced them man and wife.

A simultaneous sigh of relief broke from the anxious bosoms of the Lady Noggs, the Dean and Tinker; the newly-wedded pair stared at each other, open-mouthed and blinking, as they strove to grasp what had happened to them.

Tinker called to Sir George's man to bring a bottle of champagne and glasses. The Dean cleared a space on the table, sat down on it his ledger-like volume, and wrote up the register quickly. The bride and bridegroom signed their names in a veritable stupor.

It was only when the wine came, and the three conspirators were drinking their health and lavishing good wishes on them, that a glimmering of understanding of their new estate dawned in their eyes.

The Lady Noggs was the first to see a sign of clear returning consciousness in Sir George's face; and she said hurriedly: "I shall be late at the dance! I must be off!"

"So must I!" said Tinker with equal haste.

"My sermon—I must get home to my sermon—at once!" said the Dean.

They were out of the room in a flash. Tinker shut the door sharply behind them, and they rushed across the hall. They nearly jammed in the doorway as they tumbled out of the flat, and they bolted down the stairs. The Dean was the first to laugh; and he followed the Lady Noggs out of the house, roaring. A chance wayfarer was amazed to see the most beautiful débutante of the year, the most popular young man about town, and the most venerable prop of the Church of England totter across the pavement in inextinguishable laughter and tumble helplessly into a motor brougham.

"Did you see his face? Oh, did you see his face?" gasped the Lady Noggs, as she threw herself back in her seat to laugh the easier.

CHAPTER VII

THE RED-HAIRED STAR

THE Lady Noggs enjoyed the ball as one who had performed the meritorious action of making two brimming young hearts beat as one deserved to enjoy it. Several times during the evening she laughed merrily for no reason that her partners could see. Indeed, the feelings of an amiable young German prince were considerably ruffled by one of these bursts of merriment which came immediately upon his carefully thought-out tribute to her charms.

In spite of her assurance that it was not the tribute which had provoked her laughter, he remained ill at ease; later in the morning, after supper in fact, he repeated the tribute word for word to his faithful and admiring equerry, and asked him if he could see the joke in it. The faithful and admiring equerry could not see the joke in it; but feeling that he owed it to himself not to appear unintelligent in the matter of royal humor, he laughed heartily till

his master's cold rebuking frown recalled him to a somewhat confused gravity.

The amiable young prince was therefore constrained, before retiring to rest after the ball, to write out the tribute and scrutinize it carefully with a view to discovering its humorous aspect. He failed, and a further scrutiny next morning brought him no nearer success. He was at intervals during his laborious day much troubled by the failure, so that in the end he was forced to conclude that the Lady Noggs was less beautiful than his first impressions of her had led him to believe.

The Lady Noggs awoke in no such uneasiness of spirit. The sense of something accomplished, something done, warmed her still with its pleasant glow. She was very gracious with her uncle at breakfast; and after breakfast, having dealt with her letters, she drove down to Michael's studio.

She found Elsie Brand, Tinker's adopted sister, sitting to Michael, a girl of a very fair frail beauty, and uncommon charm and character. The painter and the sitter were both for abandoning the sitting and devoting the hour to the pleasure of the society of the Lady Noggs. But the Lady Noggs would have none of it. Elsie's morning sittings robbed Michael of some of the time he should be spending

on his serious painting. He had, however, insisted that she must sit to him in the morning; he must be at his freshest to do justice to her delicate beauty.

The Lady Noggs said firmly that he could work, and they could talk; that he could even talk a little while he worked—but the sitting must continue. Elsie's maid retired to the kitchen, and they spent a very pleasant hour.

The Lady Noggs told them that Sissie Alloway and Sir George Leuty had got themselves married, by special license, in the most romantic fashion. She did not say that either she or Tinker had had a hand in it. She conveyed the impression that the romantic pair had done the romantic thing on their own romantic inspiration. That was the impression she intended to convey and to go on conveying. She and Tinker had agreed to keep silence about their share in the romantic event; and they were sure that the Dean would display an equal discretion.

"If I intended ever to get married, that is how I should like to get married—very quietly—without any fuss," said Elsie.

"If you intended ever to get married! Of course you'll get married!" cried the Lady Noggs.

"No, I shall never marry," said Elsie firmly.

"Oh, but indeed you will," said the Lady Noggs with equal firmness. "I had no idea that you had fancies of this kind. I shall have to see about it—and at once."

"See about what?" said Elsie quickly and uneasily.

"About getting you married. Now, who is there good enough for you?" said the Lady Noggs, knitting her brow with an air of serious consideration.

"For goodness' sake, Noggs, leave me alone! I—I—don't want you—or any one—to go seeing about it!" cried Elsie in a panic.

"Oh, but I must. It's my duty. Now, there's Sir John Hartleigh; he's devoted to you," said the Lady Noggs with unabated seriousness.

"Sir John Hartleigh!" cried Elsie.

"Yes; he's a very nice fellow. But perhaps you're right. He is too young for you. Yes; you ought to marry a man a good deal older than yourself—Lord Weldstone, now."

"I wouldn't! Nothing would induce me to!" cried Elsie.

"But he's a nice ripe age; he'd make you a very good husband," said the Lady Noggs in the injured tone of one whose excellent suggestion has been rejected without due consideration. "Then there's

Sir Francis Bevington, or Mr. Brownrigg—he's in the Cabinet for all his big mustache; and, of course, there's my uncle, the Marquis of Hartlepool. He's a widower; but you wouldn't mind that. You certainly ought to marry some one a good deal older than yourself."

"I won't! I won't! I won't marry any one!" cried Elsie.

"But you must marry some one older than yourself. Don't you think she ought to, Michael?" said the Lady Noggs.

"No, I think Miss Brand ought to marry a young man," said Michael.

"Ah, you're a romantic. You don't understand the exigencies of life in the polite world," said the Lady Noggs. "I dare say you're even rather shocked at my discussing Miss Brand's marriage so frankly. But we do, you know. My family—not of course my uncle, Lord Errington—the rest of my family discusses my marriage every week in solemn conclave with its familiar friends. I know it does."

"Your marriage?" said Michael a little blankly.

"Well, perhaps I should say my alliance; for, of course, I shall make an alliance. But Miss Brand hasn't got a family; and Lady Beauleigh, who acts

as mother to her, is an American and a heretic who believes in love-matches. Therefore I must see after her, and find her a suitable husband, twenty-five or perhaps thirty years older than she is."

"Oh, do leave it alone, Noggs," said Elsie.

"No, no; it is my duty, and I will," said the Lady Noggs.

"But I tell you I don't want to marry; and I won't!" cried Elsie.

"It isn't what you want; it's what's good for you," said the Lady Noggs. "And as for saying you won't, you wait till I get started, my child, and you'll see."

"Oh, dear! It's perfectly beastly of you to interfere," said Elsie; and she said it almost in a tone of despair, for long experience had given her a very wholesome respect for her ingenious friend's effective activity.

"One's duty is so often beastly," said the Lady Noggs in the tone of one closing the discussion.

She left them, very well pleased at having inspired this dread into Elsie; she thought that it would help drive her into Tinker's arms.

When she reached home she found that a letter had just come for her, and, opening it, found that it was from Sissie. It ran:—



"DEAR LADY GRANDISON,

"You will understand that I do not care to see you—not at present, at any rate—after the cruel and unjust things you said about my husband last night, and as we are just starting for Paris, where I am getting my trousseau, I am sending round my new maid to pack my things, if you will show her where they are. I can not think how you came to form such a horrid opinion of George, and I do not feel that I can ever forgive it. I did not think you were like that, and it has been a very painful revelation to me.

"Yours truly,
"CECILIA LEUTY."

"Ungrateful little beast!" said the Lady Noggs, flushing with anger; and then she laughed.

It was no little consolation to her to observe, after some reflection, that she had an excellent reason, in this letter, for avoiding firmly for the future Lady Leuty's chatter; and she sat down to write to Mr. 'Alloway in a very cheerful spirit. She wrote:

"MY DEAR MR. ALLOWAY,

"You will be much surprised to learn that Cecilia has married Sir George Leuty. Both of them being of romantic dispositions, they did it quite suddenly and quietly. They would doubtless have taken you into their confidence about this important step, if they hadn't been so much in love with each other that they were not in a state to consider any one else. People in love are rather selfish, of course. It

is a very good match, for he will make her a very good husband; and it is also a good thing that he has plenty of money. I expect that you will feel hurt at first that you were not consulted, and I expect you will be angry with me for not warning you; but I did not know that they were going to be married till five minutes before the ceremony. I think that after a while you will be pleased to have Sissie so happily settled.

"With kind regards,

"Yours sincerely,

"FELICIA GRANDISON."

It seemed to her a very safe letter to write; and to make it safer she wrote also to Lady Leuty.

"DEAR SISSIE,

"Your feelings are very natural. I think it would be best if you did not tell any one that I arranged the actual ceremony. People will think it so much more romantic if they think that you and Sir George arranged it yourselves, and they will gossip less about it. With all good wishes for your happiness,

"Yours sincerely,

"FELICIA."

The Lady Noggs felt that she had done everything that in her lay to prevent unpleasant gossip about the way in which Sir George and Lady Leuty had come to be married; and she hoped that they would take her hint and maintain a wise reticence,

letting it go as a romantic inspiration of their own. She was a little doubtful about Sissie's power of reticence; she could only trust that Sir George would strengthen it.

She was in some dread lest Mr. Alloway should come to town to inquire from her the circumstances of his daughter's romantic wedding, and she was much relieved to get a letter from him three days later. It was a letter of resignation, not untempered by cheerfulness. The text of it was that young people would be young people, that Sissie had probably enjoyed her romantically secret marriage even more than she would have enjoyed the proper elaborate ceremony—the Lady Noggs, remembering Sissie's dazed face, thought not. In the face of this romance, he did not see how he could have been consulted beforehand; consequently he was not hurt. At any rate, he was very glad that Sissie had married a man she was fond of, and a man who seemed so fond of her. He had had letters from his daughter and his son-in-law. Sir George had written him a very handsome letter of apology for their romantic secrecy, and had informed him in it that his lawyers were drawing up a very handsome marriage settlement. Mr. Alloway ended his letter

by expressing his regret that Sissie had played her such a trick. The Lady Noggs entertained a very well-founded belief that it was not Sissie who had played the trick, and she was very well content with Mr. Alloway's attitude.

She showed the letter to Tinker, and he said: "Well, Leuty seems to be behaving all right. If he had been the intensely sad dog he pretended, he would hardly be making handsome settlements."

"It does look as if you were right, and he'd only been posing," said the Lady Noggs. Then she added thoughtfully: "But I wonder whether he will be happy with Sissie. She is such a little idiot."

"Many men prefer idiots," said Tinker.

"Yes, they do. Let's hope that he is one of them."

"It's always just a toss up whether you're happy with your wife," said Tinker.

"Or with your husband," said the Lady Noggs.

"If men would only take the trouble to fall in love with girls they've known a long while, they wouldn't so often find marriage disappointing."

"But they prefer to marry strangers," said the Lady Noggs. "But you're all right; you'll marry Elsie."

"I have my doubts of it," said Tinker. "She's an obstinate little—angel."

They pondered the matter a little while in silence; then Tinker said: "It's rather odd, but I've never been able to hit on a man I can see you married to. In the case of most girls I can see a man, or two or three men, to whom they could very well get married. In your case I can't."

"No more can I," said the Lady Noggs.

"I suppose you think about it sometimes. You'll have to get married, you know."

"Oh, I shall contract an alliance, I suppose—some day. But as for falling in love and getting married, it doesn't seem very likely."

"There's certainly a good deal of 'maiden meditation, fancy-free' about you so far," said Tinker. "By the way, where did you find that bright blithe child who is doing my portrait for Dorothy?"

"Michael? Hasn't he told you? He was the little boy I carried off from Grimestone Square—years ago."

"Oh, that was it, was it? He seems to be a rather desperate case. You'll have to be careful with his heart; I should say it was one of the brittle

"I should think it was; and I shall be very gentle with it," said the Lady Noggs, flushing faintly. "But I don't think Michael will come to any harm; he's really very keen on his work. Besides, I'm very fond of Michael. He's the dearest child. I shall take care that he isn't hurt."

"You generally know what you're doing and, after all, you don't go about collecting scalps—hearts, I mean."

"Hearts are funny things. I can't understand them," said the Lady Noggs.

None the less in the matter of fond hearts, it seemed to be her fate to intervene. She had just made a match; within the week she was called on to help break one.

Two mornings later she was dealing with her letters, trying so to accept invitations as to get the most pleasure out of clashing entertainments. She was, moreover, somewhat ruffled in temper, since in addition to the invitations from members of her circle were three from pushing strugglers of the millionaire kind, fighting their way up the society hierarchy. Either her acquaintance with the senders was too slight to justify the invitations, or there was no acquaintance at all. She was used to such

invitations; but every time the impudence of millionaires annoyed her.

She was drawing to the end of her task, when the study door opened; the butler announced Miss Pollifax, and her cousin Elizabeth came in. She had grown up of a tallness surprising, considering the striated barley diet of her childhood. She was still dressed with a great lack of taste, in a fashion that showed her quite incapable of making the best of herself.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt you, Noggs," she said as she shook hands. "I wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been so very important."

"Oh, that's all right. Come on up to my boudoir, and we'll talk there while Miss Carson writes the letters," said the Lady Noggs kindly, as she took Elizabeth up-stairs.

As the Lady Noggs closed the door of the boudoir, Elizabeth cried: "Oh, Noggs, there is such trouble at home!"

"Reggie again, I suppose," said the Lady Noggs. "What's you wicked brother been doing now?"

"He's got engaged to a music-hall girl! A girl who sings vulgar songs and dances at music-halls!" cried her cousin.

"It sounds bad. Sit down and tell me about her."

"I have told you! She's a girl in a music-hall!" cried Elizabeth, dropping into a chair.

"That's neither here nor there—nowadays. Is she one of the respectable, hard-working kind?" said the Lady Noggs, leaning back and putting the tips of her fingers together with the air of a lawyer weighing a difficult case.

"I don't know. But she has red hair," said Elizabeth in the tone of one clenching the matter.

"Lots of respectable people have red hair," said the Lady Noggs patiently. "At least, I hope so." And she was silent, considering the matter. Then she said: "If she's respectable, and you come to consider Reggie's record, perhaps it will turn out the best thing for him."

"Oh, Noggs, how can you say such a thing!" cried Elizabeth.

"But it may be Reggie's chance. He's been awfully wild—to put it mildly. He drinks a good deal, you know. Perhaps marriage would steady him," said the Lady Noggs calmly.

"Marriage with a music-hall girl?" cried Elizabeth.

"That's the only kind of marriage he can get.

He won't come near any of us. He hasn't been in any house one knows for at least two years. He's grown a—a hermit of the *coulisses*. 'A' man can only marry in the circle in which he moves. Besides, if he has made up his mind to marry this red-haired one, marry her he will. You know how obstinate he is."

"But he must be stopped! Mother's bent on stopping him! She's written a terrible letter to him—terrible!"

"Then she's settled the matter beyond all changing! How silly!" cried the Lady Noggs in some irritation. Then she went on in the calm tone of one impartially considering the matter: "Really your mother's been driving him to it ever since he was a boy. She repressed and repressed him all through his boyhood till he came of age; then, at once, he kicked over the traces. Some such marriage as this was practically inevitable, and she's made it quite inevitable. What an awful mess a woman who tries to manage the world always makes of her own home!"

"But it isn't inevitable, Noggs! It mustn't be!" cried Elizabeth in deep distress.

"I'm afraid it is; and I dare say it may turn out much better than you think. Let's hope it will."

"But it *must* be stopped! I came to you to find out a way. You've always been so good at getting out of messes," wailed Elizabeth.

"These messes of the heart are so much more difficult," said the Lady Noggs sagely. "Besides, it isn't my mission in life to get my cousins out of matrimonial messes. It isn't, really. They only hate you for it."

"But you're the only person Reggie will listen to. He always says there's no nonsense about you."

"It's very flattering; and I won't destroy his good opinion of me by interfering."

"You must. I believe you won't interfere because you don't like mother."

"Elizabeth, you're growing acute as well as learned," said the Lady Noggs, smiling. "There's something in that. But, really, interference is useless—so what's the good of it?"

"You would if you wanted to," said Elizabeth. "Oh, I wish you would!"

The Lady Noggs frowned and said: "Well, it's against my better judgment. But, just to please you, I'll look and see if I can do anything. What's her name?"

"Susie Red. You must have seen it on the hoardings."

"Susie Red! It's not a name for one's sister-in-law. But all the same, she's at the top of her profession, a star of the first magnitude, and that means that it will be much more difficult to stop, because she's clever. Reggie *has* won a prize."

"A prize? How can you talk like that, Noggs? You seem to find something funny in everything!" Elizabeth protested.

"I try to," said the Lady Noggs dryly. "Just wait till I've finished my letters, and I'll take you a motor ride."

"No, no; I can't. Mother disapproves of motoring. She'd be sure to hear of it," said Elizabeth, rising hastily.

The Lady Noggs opened her mouth to tell her what she thought of her mother's repressing her, shut it, and bade her good-by quite mildly. She saw no use in wasting her breath.

Elizabeth gone, she went back to her study and finished dealing with her letters. Then she put on her hat and went down to her motor-car. She took the steering-wheel and drove to Huddersfield House. The butler led her straight to the duchess' boudoir, and she was in it before she knew that Lady Pollifax was also there.

To the Lady Pollifax the Lady Noggs was as a

red rag to a bull, and on the Lady Noggs Lady Pollifax had precisely the same effect. Lady Pollifax was born to meddle. Publicly, she meddled through such societies as the Anti-Dramatic League, the Society for the Prevention of Dancing to Street Organs, and other societies which waged war against the harmless pleasures in which their members took no delight. Privately, she meddled with every human being she could reach, and, above all, with the members of the different branches of her own extensive family. Several times during the childhood of the Lady Noggs she had meddled with her strenuously, trying to force her into the groove along which she was dragging her own unfortunate children. These meddlings had been barren of everything save bad temper. Now that her niece was enjoying her first season and was no longer amenable to childish discipline, Lady Pollifax never met her without nagging at her about her course of life. She would urge her, acrimoniously, to abandon the degrading practise of waltzing, of eating lobster salad, or wearing bright colors, of allowing her friends to call her by the childish nickname of Noggs.

From the anxious gravity on the faces of both her aunts the Lady Noggs perceived that she had

come into the middle of a discussion of the delinquency of Reginald.

"How are you, Noggs?" said the duchess; and her moon-like face regained something of its usual comfortable content at the sight of her niece. She was having an unpleasant time with her sister, and she hoped for a diversion.

"Really, Elizabeth, I wonder at your calling Felicia by that childish name! It's a trivial matter; but it encourages her to go on trifling away her life in idle pleasures," said the Lady Pollifax, and her narrow pinched face looked sour enough to curdle milk.

"It's shorter than Felicia," said the duchess.

"I like it," said the Lady Noggs. "I came to ask what time you would like to start for Hurlingham this afternoon, Aunt Elizabeth."

"That's it—wasting the golden hours of youth watching trivial games! Or are you going to debase your mind by watching the brutal and degrading sport of pigeon-shooting?" said the Lady Pollifax.

"They've done away with pigeon-shooting at Hurlingham, Aunt Lily; and you know very well that I shouldn't watch it, if they hadn't. I hate cruelty," said the Lady Noggs, and her eyes began

"I don't know anything of the kind. From your general course of life, I should have expected you to enjoy it. The women of the later Roman Empire did," said Lady Pollifax viciously. "I hope you're not going in a staring orange frock like that."

The Lady Noggs' eyes flashed, but she kept herself in hand and drawled: "This is one of my quietest morning gowns. I'm going to wear a brighter one this afternoon—scarlet—the brightest scarlet you ever saw. If you haven't seen it, you couldn't dream that scarlet could be so scarlet."

"Felicia, you surprise me! You shock me! No self-respecting woman would wear scarlet! Are you aware of the appalling associations connected with scarlet?" cried Lady Pollifax.

"I believe that the poor Pope used to be called the scarlet woman. And I could never make out why. But every self-respecting woman would wear scarlet if she could; but she can't. I can. Don't you wish you could, Aunt Lily?" said the Lady Noggs with gentle suavity.

"Me! Me wear the disgusting color!" cried Lady Pollifax.

"Perhaps you'd better not," said the Lady Noggs with thoughtful hesitation. "It wouldn't really suit you. Besides, it would make people talk; they'd say you had reformed."

"Now, now, now," said the duchess hastily. "Why will you quarrel with Noggs? You always get the worst of it, Lily. We've got something more serious to talk about than her gowns."

"Of course, Reggie's wedding-present!" cried the Lady Noggs; and her wrath broke in the most mischievous smile. "You will find it a business to choose something really nice for him. I shall give mine to his wife. I don't suppose she'll get many, poor girl."

Lady Pollifax glared, opened her mouth wide, and seemed to choke on her words.

"Now be off, Noggs! Go!" said the duchess hastily.

The Lady Noggs walked slowly to the door, and Lady Pollifax found breath to gasp: "Disgraceful—lost to all sense of decency!"

"Don't say that, Aunt Lily. The music-hall stage is the last refuge of respectability. It is really," said the Lady Noggs, and she vanished.

She ran down the stairs, smiling her relief and content at having got quits with her malignant aunt, and thinking that she would yet further clear her temper by driving out to Richmond Park, turned the car down into Piccadilly. She had not gone thirty yards down it, when she saw her faithful counselor Tinker taking the air in leisurely fashion,

in that bracing thoroughfare. At once she stopped the car and invited him to drive with her. He accepted; Gaston moved into the tonneau, and Tinker took the seat beside her. They started, and they had not gone far before he said: "You're a little off your driving. Has anything ruffled your amiable temper?"

"I've just had an interview with Vinegar Lil," said the Lady Noggs, who had conferred that name on her aunt in a moment of childish inspiration.

"She is trying. She tried to break me of polo last time we met."

"I tell you, Tinker, she's the most impossible woman in London!" said the Lady Noggs. "However, her disagreeable virtues are beginning to find her out. Have you heard that Reggie is going to marry a music-hall star—a girl called Susie Red?"

"No! How delightful! It *is* a judgment on your vinegar aunt!" said Tinker, and he laughed gently. "Well, some such marriage was inevitable," he added.

"That's what I said when Elizabeth asked me to help stop it. What sort of a girl is Susie Red? I suppose you know her."

"I've met her. Yes; she was with Reggie. Oh, she's a very pretty girl."

"Is she respectable?"

"I've never heard anything against her. Indeed, now I come to think of it, she had a chaperon of sorts with her at that supper—though that is neither here nor there. But she certainly spoke nicely, and was quiet, with rather pretty manners."

"It doesn't sound so bad," said the Lady Noggs thoughtfully. "I said to Elizabeth that it might be the best thing for Reggie, that it might pull him round and steady him."

"That's a very good way of looking at it for one or two reasons. In the first place, there's Reggie's obstinacy; if he's set his mind on marrying the girl, he will—if it's only to spite his mother. In the second place, he may really be a bit tired of going to the devil—he's had three years of it—and the girl may pull him up. She struck me as being a girl of character," said Tinker thoughtfully.

"I think it's about his only chance," said the Lady Noggs.

"There or thereabouts."

"And he can't lose anything by it—socially. He hasn't been in a decent house, except when he has strolled in to see me and get lectured, for a good two years," said the Lady Noggs.

"No; he certainly hasn't anything to lose."

"Then I shan't try to stop him. I like him a good deal; I'm sorry for him. He never had a chance. I won't run the risk of quarreling with him about it."

"I shouldn't," said Tinker.

Thus the Lady Noggs came back from her drive strengthened in the resolve provoked by the spite of Lady Pollifax, to lend no hand toward stopping the marriage. But her resolve was shaken, for all the way to and from Hurlingham that afternoon the duchess deplored the match, taking it far more deeply to heart than the Lady Noggs had expected. The duchess even admitted that the marriage might reform Reggie; but she pointed out that he might very well grow tired of going to the devil without taking the drastic remedy of a wife from the music-halls. There was no advantage in his loading himself up with a perpetual red-haired incumbrance. Then, again, there was the matter of the family; and she hated the idea of the loss of prestige it would suffer from such a misalliance. The Lady Noggs was fond of the duchess, and she had a considerable respect for her good sense and knowledge of the world. She felt that she ought to help her.

During the next ten days she heard of little else

from her relations but the unfortunate match. The different branches of her family had abundant leisure, and they devoted all of it to being harrowed by Reggie's fate. Two more visits of the distressful Elizabeth weakened the resolve yet more, and at last the Lady Noggs made up her mind to follow her usual course of going to see for herself.

Accordingly, the next afternoon she drove down to Susie Red's flat in the Charing Cross Road. She expected to have her susceptibilities ruffled by a garish interior, and she was agreeably surprised to find herself in a plushless drawing-room of an excellent decorative scheme of white and dull orange, the very frame for a red-haired woman. Doubtless the scheme was an upholsterer's, but his work had not been marred by any morbid depravity in plush, knick-knacks or ornaments. Plainly, whether its owner had taste or not, she had the good sense to leave the expert alone. Then, when Susie Red entered, her appearance was another surprise. She was dressed in a very simple, very expensive black gown, and her wonderful red hair, which the Lady Noggs had expected to be fuzzy, was soft, silken and dressed simply over a charming oval face of that lustrous, almost porcelain paleness that sometimes goes with red hair. But the greatest surprise of all

came when, after one look at the Lady Noggs, Susie Red came forward with outstretched hands and shining eyes. "Why, it's my dear Lady Noggs!"

"Why, it's Sue! Susan Gay!" gasped the Lady Noggs, taking the outstretched hands.

"Yes! it's me," said Susie Red.

A vivid vision of the bedraggled slum child sent down by the Fresh Air Fund to Stonorill village, with whom she had played and whom she had befriended, filled the Lady Noggs' mind, and she cried: "Why—however did you come here—like this?"

"It was all your doing—at least, you began it—you got me out of Drugger's Rents into the Girls' Home. But sit down. We'll have some tea, and I'll tell you all about it. It's a long story," said Susie Red, ringing the bell.

The Lady Noggs sank into a chair; Susie Red drew another close to it, sat down and said: "My word, you have grown a beauty!"

"I don't think you've any reason to complain on that score, Sue," said the Lady Noggs, smiling.

"I don't. I'm all right," said Sue simply, and she continued with eager animation: "My face has helped me well enough; but you gave it the chance,

and you made me keen on taking it. When I was leaving the Girls' Home, and I found that your people didn't think me good enough to be your maid, I made up my mind that if I couldn't be in your service, service wasn't good enough for me. But I had to begin that way, and I went to Lady Sainton as third housemaid. She was an invalid, and she found out that I could read aloud nicely. I used to read to her for hours and hours—she wouldn't let any one else, and sometimes she talked to me, telling me how to speak and pronounce properly when I was reading. Then she died at the end of a year and left me a hundred pounds, and I saw that if I wanted to get out of service this was my chance. I'd thought it out often enough, and made up my mind that for a girl with my face there was more money in the stage than anything else. I didn't think it a soft thing, but I thought it might be done. A hundred pounds goes a long way when you've come from Drugger's Rents. I thought of the chorus, and so I started to learn dancing. They'd taught me to sing at the Girls' Home—mostly hymns, for I was in the choir. I went to Madam Lenoir. She's dear, but she's good, and she helps her pupils. Of course, I can't dance real dancing. I

began too late. But the dancing I do, I do all right. You see, I worked at it like a nigger, and then I never let myself get slack. Then I found that there was more money in the halls than in the chorus; and I took singing lessons—singing lessons, quite good ones, are cheap—not like good dancing lessons. Then I got three songs. I went to the best man for them. He was dear, but good. I was nearly cleaned out before I was ready to begin, then I began hunting a job. It wasn't so hard. When you've got a face like mine, and can help yourself, men are ready to help you, and I used them. They weren't on the square, and why shouldn't I use them?"

"Why not?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Though I kept straight, mind you," said Sue firmly.

The Lady Noggs nodded.

"So I got a start at the Panjandrum at thirty-five shillings a week," Sue went on with a sigh of relief. "It was three pounds at the end of a month. In two months it was seven pounds at the Tottenham; and now it's a hundred a week at the Casino."

"Then you're a rich woman," said Lady Noggs.

"I am; and that's what I wanted to be. I'm saving eighty pounds a week. I don't spend any

more than is good for advertisement—like this flat to be interviewed in."

"Sue, you're a wonder!" cried the Lady Noggs with fervent conviction. "I've been thinking myself clever—for a girl. But never again."

"Don't say that," said Sue quickly, with a pained air. "I'm clever at my game, because I had to be. I guess if you had to be, you'd be cleverer than me—than I."

The Lady Noggs shook her head and said: "No. And I congratulate you most heartily. But all the same, it seems almost an impertinence for me, who have always got everything I wanted for the mere asking, to congratulate a real fighter like you."

"Don't say that. I'd rather have your congratulations than any one's. After all, it's your doing. You got me out of Drugger's Rents."

"A child's whim," said the Lady Noggs.

"There ain't—there aren't many children who'd have had the whim, much less have stuck to it as you did," said Sue.

The Lady Noggs shook her head, and they were silent a while. The Lady Noggs was feeling uncomfortable about her errand. Sue was examining her in detail with devouring, affectionate eyes.

Then Sue's face turned anxious, and presently she said: "I suppose you've come about my marrying Reggie—Lord Pollifax?"

"Well, yes; that is what I did come about," said the Lady Noggs with some hesitation. "His people have been bothering me about it. They're all very much distressed, you know."

"I wasn't going to trouble his people, seeing the mess they'd let him make of himself. But circumstances alter cases," said Sue slowly.

"What do you mean?"

"I wasn't reckoning you among his people. I never tumbled to it that Lady Grandison was Lady Noggs. Your never letting yourself be photographed for the papers prevented me. And it makes a difference—a great difference," said Sue sadly.

"Oh?" said Lady Noggs.

"Yes. I can't go distressing you, because if it hadn't been for you, I should never have had my chance. I shouldn't be here," said Sue; and there were tears in her eyes.

"Do I understand that you propose to give Reggie up to oblige me?" cried the Lady Noggs, amazed.

"Well, fair's fair, and I would try. But I don't know that I could. I don't really. I'm very fond of him. I—I don't know—it isn't only being fond

of him—nor is it the money and the title—but I like looking after him and keeping him straight. I—I sort of mother him." She blushed and looked at the Lady Noogs with a shamefaced air. Then she added fiercely: "But let's have it plain. I don't give him up because of his people—or because it's good for him. It isn't! I can keep him off the drink, and I do. I know I should be a handicap in a way; but he'd get on better with me handicapping him than without. I don't want to give him up —make no mistake about that—for I'm fond of him. I should give him up just for you—because I couldn't go back on you."

"But goodness me! I'm not going to interfere!" cried the Lady Noggs. "I won't have it. I won't come into the matter at all! I won't take the responsibility. I've no right to. You will just settle it between yourselves, you, he and his people. I'm out of it."

"Do you mean that?" said Sue, with a little gasp of relief. "Do you mean that you won't really feel cut up at your cousin's marrying a girl from the halls?"

"No, I shan't," said the Lady Noggs firmly. "Indeed, I'm beginning to think that Reggie is getting the best of the bargain."

"You're just like what I always thought you were," said Sue; and as she spoke the bell of the flat rang.

"You'd certainly better not see much more of me, then. It would be a pity to shatter an ideal," said the Lady Noggs, laughing.

The door opened, and the maid ushered in Reggie Pollifax. The Lady Noggs saw at once that he had vastly improved, in health, at any rate, since she had last seen him. The lines of dissipation were nearly smoothed out of his face, he had recovered his old fresh color, his eye was clear, he was young again.

"Hallo, Noggs! *You* here?" he said, frowning.

"Yes; I've been renewing my acquaintance with Sue," said the Lady Noggs quietly. "We found that as children we had been playfellows at Stonorill."

"By jove!" said Lord Pollifax.

"And you have my sincere congratulations. I think you're awfully lucky to be marrying Sue."

"Really, this is awfully decent of you, Noggs," he said, flushing with pleasure.

"She was always like that—always," said Sue.

A maid came in, bringing the tea, and kept them silent. As she was setting it out, the bell of the flat rang again. She went out and opened the door,

and into the room flounced Lady Pollifax, her face set in the mood for war.

The unexpected sight of the Lady Noggs put her off her intended onslaught on Sue. Habit was too strong for her; she must have the first fling at her old enemy, and she cried: "You here, Felicia!"

"Yes; it's me—it's not my spook—you can squeeze my hand, if you're in any doubt, Aunt Lily," said the Lady Noggs kindly, holding the hand out.

"I suppose you think I'm surprised!" snapped Lady Pollifax. "I'm not! I didn't expect to find you hobnobbing with this creature! But I'm not surprised! No!"

"My good aunt, I must ask you to be civil. Sue is an old friend of mine, and I won't have my visit of congratulation to her made an occasion for your usual offensive rudeness," said the Lady Noggs, with the happy idea of drawing her aunt's fury on herself.

Lady Pollifax gasped and cried: "Offensive rudeness! Old friend! Nonsense! You don't impose on me! This wretched misguided boy brought you here to see this—"

The Lady Noggs sprang up briskly and cried sternly: "Now, Aunt Lily, apologize at once! How dare you give me the lie?"

"Apologize! Nonsense! I'm tired of——"

"Really, Sue, I didn't come here to be insulted by an aunt," the Lady Noggs broke in.

With a quickness which went far to explain her success in life, Sue took the lead offered her, and said with an excellant air: "I must really insist on your apologizing, Lady Pollifax. I can't have you taking advantage of your position as my future mother-in-law to insult my guests. Please apologize at once."

"Taking advantage of—oh! I won't apologize!" Lady Pollifax almost screamed.

"Then I'm afraid, Reginald, I must ask you to take your mother away," said Sue with great dignity.

A shadow of a grin crossed Lord Pollifax's boyish face; he stepped forward, took his mother by the arm, and said: "You must come away, mother. You can't behave like this, you know." And on the instant he bustled her, too taken aback to resist, firmly out of the room and out of the flat.

He shut the door on her, and came briskly back. On the faces of Sue and the Lady Noggs were irrepressible smiles.

"Well—you two—you are the limit!" he said, and they all laughed.

"I thought if I intervened and had the row, there'd be less clearing up to do after you were married," said the Lady Noggs cheerfully. "You needn't look distressed, Sue; I'm used to rows with Reggie's mother."

"I think it has made things smoother. My mother won't come near us for a year, and that's a great deal gained," said Lord Pollifax thoughtfully.

"Then let's have tea. Rows make me thirsty," said the Lady Noggs.

Over their tea Sue and Reggie discussed their plans with her. She urged them to get married quickly and to be done with it, observing sagely: "There's no kicking against that *fait accompli.*"

As she rose to go, she said: "I'll call for you to-morrow at half past one, Sue; we'll lunch at the Carlton, and I'll take you for a motor drive in the park afterward."

"By jove, you don't do things by half, Noggs," said Reggie gratefully, perceiving how this open recognition would smooth their way.

"Why should I?" said the Lady Noggs. "And I tell you what, Sue, in the autumn we'll be painted together by Sargent. Of course, he'll make you the living likeness of Lucrecia Borgia and re-

produce in my face the less agreeable traits of the Marquise de Brinvilliers. But we shall make a splendid picture, and you can't have immortality for nothing."

She kissed Sue, and they went with her to the door of the flat. On the landing she paused, raised her hand, and said solemnly: "Bless you, my children."

She ran down the stairs, and at the door of the building came face to face with the duchess, entering with an air of stern resolution which sat ill on her moon-like face.

The Lady Noggs caught her by the arm, and said: "It's no good, auntie. You can't do anything. I've given my consent."

"Oh, how could you, Noggs?" cried the duchess.



CHAPTER VIII

A FAMILY COUNCIL

THE Lady Noggs had no little difficulty in bringing the duchess to an end of her lamentations and complaint. She was indeed compelled to be very firm with her.

"It's no use your fussing, auntie. I've made up my mind that Susie Red will make Reggie the very wife he wants; and I'm going to back him up for all I'm worth. And that's all there is to it," she said at last.

"It's too bad of you, Noggs," wailed the duchess. "You've always been so keen on the family; and now, just in the most important matter of all, you let us down."

"Well, one can apply a little common sense even to the prestige of the family," said the Lady Noggs firmly. "It gains a lot of prestige from the life Reggie has been living the last three years, doesn't it? And here he has a chance of pulling himself together and leading a decent life; and I am going

to help him take it. But you must see Sue——"

"Sue? You call her Sue—already?" cried the duchess, in a tone of despair.

"Susie, I mean—Susie is a prettier name," said the Lady Noggs; and she made up her mind that it would be wiser to leave Sue's earlier years in Drugger's Rents in the obscurity that had marked them.

"Susie!" cried the duchess, with the snort of a war-horse. "Our housemaids used to be called Susan."

"Yes, and now they're called Gwendolen. But you really must see her."

"I can't and I won't; and that's flat. Sigismund is furious about the matter," said the duchess.

"Well, you'll have to when they're married, you know. It would be more graceful to make friends now. You *will* make friends, I assure you; you'll really like her when you do know her."

"Oh, bother you, Noggs! It seems to me that you're really running the family, and not me at at all. But I tell you what, you show her to Errington. He's a fool, of course——"

"He isn't!" said the Lady Noggs.

"——as I'm always telling you. But he does know whether anything's good of its kind. I'll hear what he says; and then I'll see."

"Very well, we'll let it go at that," said the Lady Noggs peacefully.

The next day she drove down to Sue's flat and took her to lunch at the Carlton. She was pleased to see that there was no fault to be found with her table manners; and Sue ingenuously admitted that soon after she had fallen in love with Lord Pollifax she had taken lessons in them.

"You can take lessons in anything," she observed. "The thing is to know that you want them."

The confession led up conveniently to the Lady Noggs' suggestion that it would be rather a good thing to sink Drugger's Rents and her earlier history.

"Yes, that is what Reggie and I thought," said Sue. "We were afraid you might have told some of your people."

"It was on the very tip of my tongue; but fortunately I stopped myself in time," said the Lady Noggs.

"That's all right, then. The papers say that I'm really the daughter of a well-known sporting nobleman," said Sue, smiling. "It was a very good story from the point of view of business; and I didn't contradict it. Why should I?"

"Why, indeed?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Reggie says that if any of his people—the women—ask me about it, I'm to say that my origin is wrapped in mystery. We wish it to be a mystery, you see, and so we wrap it up."

"And that's a really good idea. For my part, I shall quote the papers, if they ask me. It's certainly no one's business but your own. But what about your family?"

"Well, none of them ever bothered about me; so six months ago I sent them all off to Canada," said Sue cheerfully. "Reggie worked it for me. He wanted to pay for it, too. But, of course, I couldn't allow that. It was the best thing I could do for them. There's no place for them in England but slums. If Drugger's Rents hasn't taken all the work out of them, they'll have a chance in Canada. At least, that's what I thought; and Reggie agreed with me. There's nothing like work for people, if only they can get a chance of doing it."

"It sounds awfully odd and attractive to hear you say a thing like that. You look like one of the lilies of the field—a red lily—which never toiled or spun," said the Lady Noggs.

"Reggie says that—not exactly that; but he says that there was never anything quite so out of keeping as my face and my talk."

"He's quite right; but, all the same, it's an attractive out-of-keeping," said the Lady Noggs.

"He says that, too," said Sue, smiling and blushing.

They lingered, talking, over their lunch; and then the Lady Noggs took Sue to tea at Errington House. Her uncle, hearing that she was at home, came to tea in the drawing-room; and she introduced Sue to him. She saw that he was taken with her face; she saw also that he was quite unaware that she was the girl Lord Pollifax was marrying; and with some artfulness she drew them into a discussion on the effect of slum life on those who enjoy it.

One of the results of the discussion was that as they were motoring in the park afterward, Sue said gravely: "I shall try to get Reggie to go regularly to the House of Lords. He never does. I suppose you can take lessons in speaking in Parliament."

"It will be a very good thing for Reggie," said the Lady Noggs, smiling.

"I think he'd do it all right after a bit. He's been very well educated; I will say that," said Sue thoughtfully.

The other result was that at breakfast next morning her uncle said: "That was a very thoughtful

and intelligent girl I found having tea with you yesterday. Miss Red, I think you said her name was."

"Yes, she's the girl Reggie Pollifax is going to marry."

Lord Errington clutched at his beard.

"Reggie Pollifax?" he cried. "But—but—I thought—I was told that she was a girl on the music-hall stage!'

"Yes, that's what Miss Red is," said the Lady Noggs gently.

"Well, I'm—blest!" said Lord Errington.

He appeared to sink into a state of meditative stupefaction; then, presently, he said: "The old order changes sometimes in a rather astonishing fashion."

"Yes," said the Lady Noggs. "Won't you drink your coffee while it's hot?"

Lord Errington drank his coffee while it was hot; then he said with the air of a man who has weighed his words: "Reginald might do much worse."

"You'd better tell Aunt Elizabeth so," said the Lady Noggs.

She was careful to make him an opportunity of doing so by telling the duchess that he had made Sue's acquaintance; and the duchess, burning with curiosity to hear his opinion of her lost no time

descending upon him at Errington House and putting him to the question.

The next morning the Lady Noggs found that the newspapers had learned of the coming marriage; they were bubbling over with the news. Apparently, too, they were overjoyed by it; the romance of the matter, as always, had touched the susceptible heart of the British Press.

Feeling that Huddersfield House would be in a truly attractive condition, the Lady Noggs, without stopping to deal with her letters, went across to it directly after breakfast.

As she expected, she found a family gathering. The duke, the duchess, and her cousin Anne were at the table eating their breakfast. The Marquis of Hartlepool sat in an armchair on one side of the light wood fire the summer morning demanded; Lady Pollifax faced him on the other side of it. Mr. and Mrs. Lymington-Green, round, rubicund and chubby, sat side by side on a couch on the other side of the room. In the window-seat, with his air of a brooding owl, sat the Honorable Poulteney Pollifax, Reggie's uncle and heir.

When the Lady Noggs entered the breakfast-room a heavy silence hung over the gathering; and from the oppressed air of the gathering she per-

ceived that some one had asked the question: "What is to be done?" and they were all cudgeling their none too fertile brains for the right answer.

Promptly she broke their respective trains of thought by greeting them with a lively cheerfulness; and she was not at all surprised to observe that it seemed to ruffle them. But the faces of the duke, the marquis, and Mr. Poulteney Pollifax grew the brighter for her presence. The face of Lady Pollifax lowered in a most unamiable scowl; and the faces of the other women remained unchanged. The face of Mr. Lymington-Green would, doubtless, have grown brighter, too; but it could not: the brightness of it, though somewhat pointless, was persistent.

When the bustle of her entry had subsided and she had sat down in a chair at the foot of the table, the heavy silence fell again; and the Lady Noggs let it fall and rest. She was not going to break it.

At last the duke coughed and said in a voice of the deepest gravity: "We are discussing this er—painful and discreditable affair, Felicia."

"Reginald Pollifax's engagement to this er—er—young person on the music-hall stage," said the Marquis of Hartlepool in a tone of solemnity which matched that of the duke; and he waved the *Daily*

Mirror in the air, a paper which contained pictures of the interesting pair, pictures somewhat spotty, but still pictures.

"Such a discussion is not at all fitted for Felicia to take part in," said the Lady Pollifax. "Besides, when I went on Tuesday to tell this creature what I thought of her brazenness, I found Felicia hobnobbing with her—actually hobnobbing with her—to my utter disgust."

"I don't believe you can hobnob over tea, Aunt Lil; it has to be done over intoxicating liquor, I fancy," said the Lady Noggs; and then, lowering her voice to a plaintive note, she turned to the duke and said: "If this is a family council, surely I ought to take part in it, Uncle Sigismund. I'm the head of the Grandison family, you know."

"Yes; I think that Felicia ought to be present; and I wish that Errington were here, too. In the face of a disaster of this kind the family must take united action—united action," said the duke with unabated solemnity; and he raised his cup of coffee to his lips.

"That's what Lymmy said—united action," chirped Mrs. Lymington-Green.

"Yes; and Lymmie agreed with me," chirped Mr. Lymington-Green.

"Oh, Errington wouldn't come. Wild horses couldn't get him here," said the duchess, helping herself to an egg.

"And if he did come, he'd disagree with everything every one else said," said Mr. Poulteney Pollifax in his deep sonorous voice.

"Yes; Errington wouldn't come. He never shows any er—er—family sense. So we must proceed without him," said the duke. "But what is this you say about Felicia's having been to see this young woman, Lily? That was ill-advised—deuced—er—exceedingly ill-advised. It will be taken for encouragement. And in a matter of this kind the family must hold together—it—must—hold together."

"That's what Lymmy said—we must all hold together," chirped Mrs. Lymington-Green.

"And Lymmie agreed with me," chirped Mr. Lymington-Green. "But Felicia didn't mean any harm. She didn't see how the young woman would take it."

"Felicia is always interfering—always," said Lady Pollifax with grating acrimony. "In a young girl of her age it's shameless—positively shameless. And interfering so indelicately—in a matter like

this—with such a creature in it. If I had done such a thing at her age, I should have been sent to my room for a fortnight and fed on bread and water."

"It was before the days of striated barley, you know. And Aunt Lil has been making up for her wasted youth by interfering ever since," said the Lady Noggs in a calm, kind, explanatory tone.

There was an uneasy shuffle throughout the room as they joined battle. Mr. Lymington-Green's chuckle was unfortunately louder than he could have wished, and he blushed deeply.

"Now, now, now—that'll do, you two—that'll do," cried the duchess hastily. "I asked Noggs to do what she could to stop the thing."

"And I thought I'd better begin by going to see what Sue—I mean Susie—was like, and if it ought to be stopped at all," said the Lady Noggs.

"Sue! Susie!" cried Lady Pollifax, holding up her hands.

"Susie's the short for Susan, Aunt Lil," said the Lady Noggs.

"Yes, yes; of course it is," said the duke. "But what we have to do is to decide what we're going to do."

And having finished his breakfast, he rose, came

to the fire, and took his stand on the hearth-rug, dominating the gathering.

"That's all very well; but the papers say the girl has red hair; and I never could bear red hair—never," said the Marquis of Hartlepool, waving the *Daily Mirror* sadly.

"And we all know why," said the deep sonorous voice of Mr. Poulteney Pollifax.

"In the face of an emergency like this the family must hold together. It—must—hold—together," said the duke.

No one contradicted him; and looking round rather helplessly, he went on: "It—er—must take common action. The question is what common action are we to take."

The silence fell again and fell heavily. Those in council assembled looked at one another hopefully, then turned away from the question in the eyes which met theirs.

"We must take some step to stop it," said the duke with some impatience; and he fixed Mr. Lymington-Green with a stern inquiring eye. Mr. Lymington-Green wriggled and looked at the floor.

"Can't any one suggest anything?" said the duke, and there was a boding touch of anger in his tone.

The Marquis of Hartlepool answered to its spur.

"We must buy her off!" he said brilliantly.

"That was the very thing in my mind," said the duke, in a tone of deep relief; and the frown cleared from his brow. "That's the way out of this silly business. The only question is whether you're prepared to give what she'll take, Lily. And it's fortunate that she's in a music-hall and not in the chorus."

"Me? Pay? Pay a creature like that?" cried Lady Pollifax.

"She can't be bought off unless she's paid," said the duke with the air of a man delivering himself of a happy inspiration.

"Of course, you'll have to pay, Lily," said the Marquis of Hartlepool.

"And think yourself lucky to get out of it," said the deep sonorous voice of Mr. Poulteney Pollifax.

"I'm afraid there's nothing else to do," chirped Mr. Lymington-Green.

"Lymmy says there's nothing else to do," chirped Mrs. Lymington-Green.

"It's always done, Lily," said the duchess.

"But why should I be the one to pay? It's not only me! This disgraceful match affects the whole family," protested Lady Pollifax in a very shrill exasperation.

"Catch Aunt Lily parting," said Lady Drippen-

ham, making her first contribution to the discussion.

"But it's really your business. Reginald is your son," cried the duke with a startled air.

"And these red-haired girls are shockingly mercenary. There was a red-haired girl once," said the Marquis of Hartlepool with a reminiscent air, and stopped short.

"They're much of a muchness, Hartlepool; and well you know it," said the deep sonorous voice of Mr. Poulteney Pollifax.

The Lady Noggs felt that the moment had come for the Grandison branch of the family to contribute its effort to the settlement of this difficult business, and she said, smiling kindly on them: "Aunt Lil is quite right; it is a family affair. So why not have a family subscription? I don't want to break off the match myself, because I think it's the only sensible thing Reggie has done for years; but suppose each of you who does want to break off the match subscribes—say, two thousand pounds."

The Marquis of Hartlepool, Lady Pollifax, Mr. and Mrs. Lymington-Green and Mr. Poulteney Pollifax rose simultaneously with singular precipitation, and with the same air of earnest purpose.

"B-b-b-but, hang it all! I've sons of my own,"

cried the duke. "There's that blazing young idiot Edward has just——"

"Shut up, Sigismund!" said the duchess.

"I must be off. I'm driving to Richmond to try my new chestnuts," said the Marquis of Hartlepool, making briskly for the door.

"I must really take Lymmy away, Elizabeth," chirped Mrs. Lymington-Green to the duchess. "We have such heaps of things to do."

"Yes, yes; Lymmie and I are full up for to-day—positively full up," said Mr. Lymington-Green.

"If all the help I get from my family is ridiculous suggestions that I should throw my money away bribing creatures of this kind, all I can say is, I wasted my time coming here," said Lady Pollifax acrimoniously.

"If anybody thought that they were going to see Lily part, they were bigger idiots than I thought," said Mr. Poulteney Pollifax agreeably; and he took up his position at the tail of the procession.

It filed out of the room, leaving the duke in frowning dignity on the hearth-rug.

"The woman's an idiot!" he said fiercely as the door closed behind it. "She'll have to buy the girl off sooner or later; and what's the good of making

a fuss about it? That was a silly suggestion of yours, Felicia—that we should all subscribe."

"It did seem to stampede the convention," said the Lady Noggs pleasantly.

"What's that?" said the duke suspiciously.

"An American phrase. But, really, my suggestion didn't matter. You couldn't buy Miss Red off, if you had all of you subscribed. She's very much in love with Reggie—really in love. And, what's more, she believes that she can keep him straight; and she's very keen on doing it. Money's no good."

"Nonsense, Felicia! Nonsense! What do you know about the world? A good lump sum will always buy them off," said the duke in his best voice of a man of the world.

"Well, you can try," said the Lady Noggs patiently. "But, you see, Reggie is settling three thousand a year on her. Capitalize that, and it is a good lump sum. Besides—there's the title."

The duke snorted like a war-horse, or his wife. As he snorted he ruffled up his hair till it looked like a crest.

"No, it's no good kicking against a brick wall," the Lady Noggs went on genially. "You know what Reggie is: his mother's son, and as obstinate as a mule."

"Errington is a good deal taken with the girl," said the duchess.

The duke knew defeat when he met it; and he accepted it like a gallant man.

"That old woman Errington *would* be taken with the girl!" he roared. "But if Reggie Pollifax does marry her, I'll never speak to the young cub again, much less have him in my house! So remember that, Elizabeth!"

He walked to the door with the stately dignity of his race, went out of it, and shut it firmly after him. The cups danced, clinking in their saucers.

"Poor Sigismund; no wonder he's upset—first Edward and now Reginald. But Edward's affair is settled," said the duchess.

"These family councils are very silly; nothing ever gets done at them," said Lady Drippenham, rising.

"It's because the men will chip in," said the duchess with a sigh. "Why can't they just put up the money when a thing wants doing and leave the rest to us?"

Lady Drippenham went out of the room. She had utterly ignored the Lady Noggs.

"Anne doesn't seem to have forgiven me," said the Lady Noggs with unaffected indifference.

"Oh, give her time," said the duchess comfortably. "Well, we may take it that this marriage is coming off."

"It's merely a matter of buying your wedding-present."

"The girl certainly has made a very good impression on Errington. He says she's very sensible and well-informed, as well as being quite presentable. But I expect you arranged the impression she was to make."

"Now, how could I, aunt?" said the Lady Noggs.

"Yes, how could you?" said the duchess ironically. "But who was she before she took to this wretched music-hall business?"

"Her origin is wrapped in mystery; and the papers say she's really the daughter of a well-known sporting peer," said the Lady Noggs glibly.

"Ah, now who would that be?" said the duchess, brightening. "Red hair? Ah, yes——" And she pondered the matter thoughtfully.

The Lady Noggs let her meditate.

"Well, Noggs," she said presently, "I suppose I'd better take your tip and make friends with her before Reggie marries her; it will save a good deal



of awkwardness probably. How shall we manage it?"

"I think it would be best for you to come to Stonorill for the week-end; and I will ask Susie and Reggie and one or two people I should like to meet her. You'll get the best idea of her at a house party, you know. Besides, you'd like to lecture Reggie on the married state, wouldn't you?" said the Lady Noggs.

"It wouldn't do him any harm," said the duchess.



CHAPTER IX

THE LADY NOGGS FAILS

THE Lady Noggs returned to Errington House and her letters with a contented mind. When she had finished dictating them she went up-stairs to her boudoir and sat for a while considering the match she was helping to make. The consideration of it led her insensibly to consider the match she wanted to make, the match between Elsie and Tinker; and she pondered that even longer.

The fruit of her pondering was that she made up her mind that it was her duty to take a more active part in bringing it about, to devote herself strenuously to the task of lightening Tinker's unhappiness.

With this end in view she went presently round to Beauleigh House, and was conducted straight to Lady Beauleigh's boudoir. Lady Beauleigh, Tinker's stepmother, a beautiful and charming American, greeted her with affectionate warmth, saying: "What lucky wind blew you round here, Noggs?"

"I came to talk about Tinker and Elsie, Dorothy," said the Lady Noggs with a serious air.

Lady Beauleigh threw up her hands and cried: "It's no use. They're hopeless—quite hopeless! I give you my word!"

"Oh, two heads are better than one. We may stimulate each other," said the Lady Noggs cheerfully.

"I don't understand your English point of view," said Dorothy. "And, what's more, I never shall. They're both head over heels in love with each other; and the natural and proper thing for them to do is to get married and be quick about it. It isn't as if they were too poor—between them they have nearly a thousand a year, to say nothing of the fact that Tinker's salary will increase steadily. But no; Elsie will have it that Tinker must marry a rich woman—that if he married *her*, it would ruin his career. In the States we hold just the opposite view, that nothing helps a man more in his career than to marry the girl he's in love with; and I'm sure we're right. I've talked to Elsie till I'm tired."

"Of course, you're right," said the Lady Noggs with conviction. "But you know what Elsie is: she's the gentlest creature in the world, except where Tinker is concerned; and there she's as fierce as a

lion and as obstinate as a mule. She has made up her mind that Tinker will suffer from marrying her; and there's no moving her, unless we can find a way of smoothing their path."

"That's what I thought. And it seemed to me that if Tinker were richer, it would smooth it and make it all right. So I proposed to settle a hundred thousand dollars—twenty thousand pounds on him. I'm sure I may look on him as a son; he's certainly been a son to me; and I haven't one of my own," said Dorothy; and she paused and sighed.

"I should have thought he was more like a younger brother, a dutiful younger brother, if there is such a thing," said the Lady Noggs.

"Well, if he were only that, I could surely settle twenty thousand pounds on him. But, no; Tinker and his father are more like each other than any two people ever were before, or ever will be. I don't mind telling you, Noggs, but Tancred, just because I was rich, would never have asked me to marry him, though he was just as fond of me as could be, if Tinker had not forced his hand in one of his ingenious ways. He marooned us one night alone together on the shore of the Gulf of Arcachon. So Sir Tancred was forced to do what he was badly wanting to do, and did ask me to marry

him. That's nearly ten years ago. And now, after letting me mother him all these years, Tinker refuses to let me settle this wretched twenty thousand pounds on him. He just won't hear of it."

"I'm sure he won't. I can hear him refusing and refusing and refusing with—exquisite politeness," said the Lady Noggs, smiling.

"That's just what he does," said Dorothy. "Oh, it does make me wild."

"It must," said the Lady Noggs with deep sympathy. "Does Elsie know of your proposal and his refusing to accept it?"

"Yes, she does."

"And she goes on expecting him some day to marry a rich woman—for her money, I suppose. Elsie *is* a little idiot," said the Lady Noggs.

They were silent a while, pondering.

"Of course, it isn't as though Tinker wouldn't have heaps of money one of these days," said Dorothy presently. "That detestable step-grandmother of his can not live forever; and she is bound to leave him her thirty thousand a year."

"And, of course, you've pointed that out to Elsie," said the Lady Noggs.

"I have, indeed; but she says that she has no right to risk it; that the horrid old woman is not



bound to leave her money to him; that if he made such a poor match as marrying her, she probably wouldn't."

"Really, where Tinker is concerned Elsie is—is *impayable,*" said the Lady Noggs.

They fell silent again, again pondering the perplexing problem.

"Look here," said the Lady Noggs suddenly. "The proper person to provide for Tinker—to make him a decent allowance, and establish him in life, is just that very old woman, his step-grandmother."

"Yes; of course she is. But would she? Tancred and Tinker have ignored her utterly for years and years," said Dorothy in a tone of grave doubt. "Besides, they both hate her so. There's no doubt that she did treat Tinker's mother shockingly."

"You never know. People, especially women, are so odd. She might be ready to forgive the ignoring. From what I've heard, she's an awful old snob. I think she ought to be approached. It might be worked."

"It might. But who's to do it? I need scarcely say that she hates me like poison," said Dorothy.

"I might have a shot at it. It would be rather fun."

"If you only would; it might get us out of the difficulty," said Dorothy quickly.

"Well, I will. Have you any idea where she is to be found?"

"As it happens, I know. She's staying at the Paragon at Brighton," said Dorothy.

"That's not an inaccessible fastness. I ought to be able to get at her there," said the Lady Noggs, rising.

"You're really going to have a try at it?" cried Dorothy, with sparkling eyes.

"I am, indeed," said the Lady Noggs.

"Well, I do wish you luck," said Dorothy. "This *impasse* is really getting on my nerves."

The Lady Noggs went home and abandoned herself to another spell of quiet thought in her boudoir, planning her campaign. She knew a good deal about the Dowager Lady Beauleigh; for two or three years before, Tinker had told her the story at length. The Dowager Lady Beauleigh, a Miss Wigram of the famous banking firm of Stryke and Wigram, had realized the ambition of her life when, as the second wife of Sir Hildebrand Beauleigh, Tinker's grandfather, she had become mistress of Beauleigh Court. In a few months from her marriage

she had grown the Beauleighiest Beauleigh of them all; and in her eyes any act that promoted the greater glory of the House of Beauleigh was not only justifiable, but also entirely laudable.

Accordingly, when, after the death of Sir Hildebrand, her stepson, Sir Tancred, had secretly married his tutor's daughter, his stepmother had taken advantage of an accident in the hunting field, which laid him on his back at Beauleigh Court for six months, helpless in her hands, to keep him apart from his young wife and prevent all communication between them. Sir Tancred had at last recovered to find that his young wife had died when Tinker was born; and for years he had cherished a bitter hatred of his stepmother, who had kept her away from him. Ten years later he had married Dorothy, and made no bones about turning his stepmother out of Beauleigh Court, which he had hitherto been unable to keep up himself. By so doing he had shattered the domination over the county her violent temper had won for her, and set her adrift in the world, a disappointed woman. She had made several attempts to become reconciled to Sir Tancred, but he had contemptuously rejected her advances.

It was on the occasion of her last proffer of the

olive branch that Tinker had told the Lady Noggs the story, and they had had a long discussion about the whole matter. The Lady Noggs had maintained that the terrible old woman had been actuated throughout by mere snobbishness; Tinker had maintained that sheer malignity had been the mainspring of her actions. They had in the end let the discussion drop without coming to any agreement.

The Lady Noggs was well aware of the unpromising nature of the material with which she had to deal in the Dowager Lady Beauleigh; but she clung to her belief that that scion of a banking house was an appalling snob; and her experience of the polite world was such that she was inclined to put no limit to the lengths to which snobbishness will go. She had great hopes that she would be able to use that characteristic to mold the impossible woman to her will and secure the happiness of Tinker and the obdurate Elsie.

After she had thought out her plan of campaign she went to the telephone and rang up her impecunious third cousin, Mrs. Carstairs. There were a number of thoughtful people, with plenty of leisure to exercise their minds on abstruse questions which did not in any way concern them, who wondered why the Lady Noggs, when it was imperatively necessary that she should be under the care of a

chaperon, invariably chose that agreeable but frivolous widow to take charge of her. It might have been that Mrs. Carstairs had her hands so full of different but interesting affairs of her own that she had never a moment to spare to discharge the chaperonial function.

Mrs. Carstairs came to the telephone herself. She was charmed by the idea of a few days at Brighton as the Lady Noggs' guest, and arranged to meet her at the station next morning.

Having settled on her plan of campaign and fixed the hour of starting for the enemy's country, the Lady Noggs felt bound to reward herself with a little relaxation. She ordered her motor-car round, drove down to Chelsea, and carried off Michael for an afternoon in the country. Doubtless it was owing to the heat and fineness of the day that that afternoon in the country prolonged itself to eleven o'clock at night, and that she and Michael came back through the moonlight, sitting unnecessarily close together, considering the spacious breadth of the tonneau, and that they seemed to awake only at intervals from a delightful dream to mutter a few vague words to each other.

The next day saw the Lady Noggs lunching at the Paragon Hotel at Brighton. A word to the head waiter had brought it about that she and Mrs. Car-

stairs were sitting at the next table to that of the Dowager Lady Beauleigh; and while her agreeable chaperon chattered away with her usual incurable frivolity, the Lady Noggs studied her opponent with considerable, but furtive, care.

She found her a large square woman with a corrugated iron face of an even brick-red hue. She looked, indeed, an impossible person to mold. Her companion lunching with her had all the air of a rabbit at its last gasp in the clutches of a stoat. But the Lady Noggs was not dismayed; she reflected that if there were a passion of snobbishness in the forbidding creature to help her, it would be of a strength to prove a powerful helper indeed.

After lunch Mrs. Carstairs departed on an adventure of her own; and the Lady Noggs went up to the hotel drawing-room to seek a way of making the acquaintance of Lady Beauleigh. She found that no seeking was necessary; Lady Beauleigh had the habit of keeping a watchful eye on the hotel register; and before the Lady Noggs had been in the drawing-room five minutes she found her future victim making the advances. This put the Lady Noggs in a position of vantage, and she received those advances without any striking display of warmth. A very little warmth, however, went a

very long way with Lady Beauleigh; and in less than half an hour the Lady Noggs, without any effort of her own, found herself on the esplanade listening to Lady Beauleigh's conversation, which poured forth in a steady stream to the somewhat loud accompaniment of a military band.

Lady Beauleigh was charmed to have so interested and distinguished a listener; she could hardly believe her luck. She persuaded her to come to tea with her in her private sitting-room; she persuaded her to dine at her table in the hotel dining-room; and the Lady Noggs needed uncommonly little persuading. Mrs. Carstairs looked somewhat queerly at her young charge's new friend, but she cherished an idea, founded on certain experiences, that her young charge rarely did unexpected things without very good reasons. She shrugged her shoulders, and ate her dinner with a peaceful mind. At the end of it, however, in response to a gentle kick under the table when the question of how they were to spend the evening was raised, she carried off her young charge to a mythical engagement. Important as was the conversation of Lady Beauleigh to her, the Lady Noggs was beginning to find it somewhat oppressive, taken in so large a quantity for the first time. She escaped, therefore, with her faithful and

pliant chaperon; and Lady Beauleigh spent a glorious evening considering the social triumph of the day, and dwelling on it at length to less fortunate, but equally questing, hotel acquaintances. She went to bed promising herself a glorious morrow.

That morrow did not fall below her expectation; at eleven o'clock in the morning she found herself sitting on the esplanade, the cynosure of every eye as she felt it, pouring out the same volume of conversation to the same accompaniment of military music into the attentive ear of the Lady Noggs.

Now the Dowager Lady Beauleigh was not given to confidence, no one less so, yet it is an authentic fact that before the hour of noon she had diverged from her favorite theme, the glories of the House of Beauleigh when she was the ruler of its destinies, and was pouring into the sympathetic ears of her new friend the cruel wrong Sir Tancred had done her, in robbing her of her share in those glories, and her passionate desire to play once more a part in the destinies of the house.

The Lady Noggs displayed the liveliest sympathy with her wrongs and her desire, and at last she said: "But why don't you insist on taking your place, the place which is your right, in the family?"

"But how?" cried Lady Beauleigh. "Sir Tan-

cred is so pig-headed. He knows that I acted in perfect good faith and in the best interests of the family when I tried to repair the harm done by his terrible misalliance—a terrible misalliance, my dear, as you have probably heard: he married the daughter of a common tutor—but that does not prevent him bearing a grudge against me, and treating me with an utter lack of consideration as—as an absolute outsider."

"He does seem to have a difficult disposition," said the Lady Noggs, with every appearance of weighing her words carefully. "But he's not the only member of the Beauleigh family. Why don't you try his son, Hildebrand? He's an important member of the family, too, as the heir to the baronetcy. If you were to get at him."

"I've thought of it several times. But I think that he has been set against me. As a matter of fact, I did try once, when he was a little boy. I offered him a home at Beauleigh Court when they were knocking about the continent, penniless—just living on what Sir Tancred made by his wits. He refused—he disowned me—actually disowned me in so many words."

The Lady Noggs smiled; she had a very vivid remembrance of Tinker as a boy; and she could see

him disowning his grandmother with quiet firmness. But she only said: "Did he, really?"

"Yes; and then his father married that American girl; and her money made them independent of me, and so Hildebrand came to live at Beauleigh Court without any help from me."

"It was certainly very unlucky for you," said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, it was, indeed. But for her money I should be at the Court still. And it would only have been a question of time. Sir Tancred would have been bound to come to me sooner or later—when it became a matter of sending the boy to Oxford; and I could have made such terms as would have got him away from his father altogether. As it was, I suppose that American woman paid."

The Lady Noggs considered the amiability of disposition displayed in these statements a moment; then she cried with the air of one to whom an uncommonly happy idea has occurred: "I tell you what: why don't you come back into the family by making Hildebrand an allowance? Insisting on it."

"His father would refuse to let him accept it," said Lady Beauleigh mournfully. "I'm sure he would."

"But he can't. Hindebrand is of age. Besides,

no man could ask his son to refuse an allowance if it were big enough—say, five thousand a year."

"Five thousand a year!" cried Lady Beauleigh; and a blank dismay smoothed half of the rugosities out of her corrugated face.

"Oh, of course, it's a question of what you can afford," said the Lady Noggs quickly.

"Afford!" cried Lady Beauleigh, with a snort, touched on the raw. "I can afford it well enough! I've saved twenty-five thousand a year for the last ten years. When I was so disgracefully turned out of Beauleigh Court I'd nothing to spend my money on—nothing. But five thousand a year's a lot of money—an enormous sum."

"It doesn't seem an enormous allowance for the heir of Beauleigh—if the Beauleighs are really such an important family as you say they are," said the Lady Noggs, with the faintest shade of doubtful contempt in her tone.

"Oh, but it is! It's a most important family—the chief family in the county by far!"

"Then five thousand a year is not at all a big allowance for the heir of it. But it's no business of mine," said the Lady Noggs, making a pretense of retiring from the discussion.

"Oh, but I attach great importance to your opinion, moving as you do in the very highest circles. I see your name in the court news as often as any one's," said Lady Beauleigh quickly.

"Well, really, if you ask my opinion, it seems to me just a question of how much you are willing to pay to take your proper place in the Beauleigh family. I shouldn't think it could possibly be done for less than five thousand a year," said the Lady Noggs with her best judicial air.

"But you don't understand," protested Lady Beauleigh. "A place in the family, and a very important place, too, is my right; and I oughtn't to have to pay at all."

She flushed with warm and righteous indignation at the wounding thought of having to save less than twenty-five thousand pounds a year.

"Yes, of course, I see that. But one has to pay for everything nowadays—rights and all," said the Lady Noggs, with the air of a social sage.

Lady Beauleigh plunged heavily into a diatribe on the mercenary character of the age. It lasted a long time; but her young new friend did not interrupt it. She wished to give her

suggestion all possible time to sink in. She foresaw that it would be some time before Lady Beauleigh accepted it, if indeed she should ever be able to bring herself to accept it.

Lady Beauleigh ended her jeremiad with the entirely inconsequent sentence: "I expect, after all, he would refuse."

She uttered it in the tone of one who would bear that refusal with a genuine and profound resignation.

"Oh, I don't think he'll refuse. He's not a boy now; and people don't refuse five thousand a year, you know."

Lady Beauleigh groaned.

"Besides, you could make it awfully ungracious to refuse," the Lady Noggs continued. "You could instruct your solicitors to write to Hildebrand Beauleigh informing them that for the future you were going to pay twelve hundred and fifty pounds into his banking account every quarter, and that the first check had already been paid in. I happen to know that all the Beauleighs bank at Coutts'."

"That would make it difficult to refuse," said Lady Beauleigh with unabated gloom.

"Impossible, I should think," said the Lady

Noggs with conviction. "But I don't think you need have any fear at all of a refusal."

"But what security have I that Hildebrand would not take the allowance, and his father go on ignoring me?" said Lady Beauleigh with a sudden animation.

"Oh, the Beauleighs are not like that," said the Lady Noggs, somewhat disgusted.

"You never know. I don't go about trusting any one myself; and when you reach my age, you won't either."

"Well, I tell you what, I could arrange for you to meet the Beauleighs at my uncle's, Lord Errington's. They could not ignore you after that—not on the top of that allowance, that is."

She saw Lady Beauleigh's face lighten and her eyes begin to shine; here was a chance of social recognition such as she had not dreamed of for years, not since her inexperienced youth, in fact.

She stammered her thanks; then she said: "I'll think about it. I think you've hit on a very good idea; but, oh, it is a lot of money—five thousand a year—five—thousand—a year."

"But if you save twenty-five thousand?" said the

"Yes, yes. I know that; but you don't understand. Well, I must think about it. I must sleep on it. I always sleep on matters of business. It was one of the chief lessons my father inculcated into me. But don't you think it could be done for less than five thousand a year? It's a lot of money," said Lady Beauleigh feverishly.

"Oh, I should think that the more money you put up, the safer it would be. It generally is. It would make you more important in the family; and that's what you want, isn't it? Ten thousand a year would be better still."

"*Ten* thousand a year!" cried Lady Beauleigh.

"Of course it would," said the Lady Noggs.

"Oh, I must go home! I must go home and think it over," said Lady Beauleigh; and she rose with an air of desperation.

"You may as well think about ten thousand a year while you are about it," said the Lady Noggs cruelly.

Lady Beauleigh gave her the look of a hunted doe and went hurriedly.

The Lady Noggs looked after her, smiling; she was inclined to think that her brilliant idea stood a very good chance of finding expression in Lady Beauleigh's action.

That good lady spent an hour of anguish pondering the parting with her superfluous but none the less beloved money. But she came to lunch, for even in her bitter perturbation of spirit she could not lose a glorious hour of basking in the luster reflected on those who lunch at the same table as the Lady Noggs.

After lunch she accompanied the Lady Noggs to the esplanade; but she did not enjoy herself for long; the thrill of social glory was presently banished by the dreadful thought of that parting with five thousand a year, which the fates were so certainly and so cruelly forcing on her. Once more she left the Lady Noggs, and retired to solitude in the hotel, to be alone with her anguish. She spent the hours striving to find a way of attaining the desire of her heart without spending her money. But in the course of the years she had already made trial of all those other ways, and fruitlessly. The dread hour was surely drawing nearer and nearer when she would be face to face with that parting.

Fortune was certainly on the side of the Lady Noggs, for after hiring a motor-car and spending the rest of the afternoon in a ride along the coast, when she came into the hotel the first person she saw was her uncle, the Duke of Huddersfield.

He greeted her with uncommon grumpiness, for her suggestion that each of the members of the family who wished to break off the match between Lord Pollifax and Sue should subscribe two thousand pounds was still rankling in his mind. Indeed, he had come down to Brighton for a few days to recover from the failure of the family council.

From the sweetness with which she talked to him it was quite clear that his beautiful niece did not perceive that he was grumpy. At the end of five minutes' kindness to him, she invited him to dine with her that night. Now there was one weakness in the duke's otherwise faultlessly ducal character: he did love to dine at some one's else expense; and sore as he was with his beautiful niece, he accepted her invitation, privily reserving to himself, of course, the avuncular privilege of remaining grumpy throughout the meal.

When Lady Beauleigh found that she was dining with the Duke of Huddersfield, as well as with Lady Grandison, and that before the staring eyes of envious Brighton, she realized that it was the supreme hour of her life; and the anguish of that coming parting was lost in the glorious sense of splendid triumph—almost.

The duke did not spoil the meal, as he had fully

intended to do, for he could not forget the cheering fact that he was dining at the expense of his niece; and it softened him. Besides, Mrs. Carstairs did not often enjoy the society of the duke, for she was only something in the nature of a seventh cousin to him. She did not lose the chance of making herself exceedingly agreeable to him. The duke was of an age to appreciate her frivolous charm. Everybody, therefore, was in a pleasant humor and it was a quite successful meal.

It is true that when the Lady Noggs chanced on the duke at the door of the hotel at ten o'clock the next morning, where he was waiting for Mrs. Carstairs to accompany him on a motor ride, he said gloomily: "Who was that old woman dining with us last night? Every minute I thought she was going to lick my hand—never was in such a funk in my life."

But Lady Beauleigh had gone up to bed in such an enthusiasm after her orgy of gratified snobbishness, that then and there she had crushed down the anguish of parting, and had written to her solicitors instructing them to pay twelve hundred and fifty pounds to Tinker's banking account and to inform him that a like sum would be paid into it every quarter.

She did not post the letter, indeed. In accordance with the teaching of her respected father she slept on it. But she arose the next morning with her resolve to part but little weakened, so strong a memory of the night before braced her to the act.

In the middle of the morning she burned her boats, to the heartening strains of the military band. She drew the letter from her bag and handed it to the Lady Noggs with an air of reckless pride.

The Lady Noggs read it and said: "I wish I could write such a good business letter."

"It was one of the chief things my father inculcated into me, writing a good business letter. I flatter myself I'm a woman of business. But I do wish I had some security that it would give me my place in the family," she added with a sudden discomfort.

"I'm sure it will. You can set your mind quite at rest about that," said the Lady Noggs with comforting certainty.

Indeed, she meant to see to it that the letter had that effect for she felt responsible for it. And she thought that Tinker could very well afford at any rate to hear what his step-grandmother had to say on any family matter for the five thousand a year which gave him Elsie. Also, she was sure that

when she had explained to Dorothy how that five thousand a year had come about, Dorothy would see to it that the sorrowful donor had those social delights for which her soul thirsted.

She remained in Brighton till the next day; and once more Lady Beauleigh had the ineffable delight of dining with her and the Duke of Huddersfield, who had attached himself to Mrs. Carstairs with uncommon tenacity.

The next morning the Lady Noggs returned alone to town. Mrs. Carstairs found that Brighton was resting her after the exhausting pleasures of the season, and wished to stay a few days longer to enjoy the fullest benefit to be derived from its indubitable ozone and the society of the duke.

The Lady Noggs came back to Errington House feeling that she had been spending her time in a very profitable fashion, smoothing the course of true love. She looked to hear in a day or two that Tinker and Elsie were engaged and shortly to be married. But when the next afternoon Tinker was ushered into her boudoir, she was disagreeably surprised to observe that his face was by no means shining with the cheerful air of the fortunate lover; and she said to herself: "What on earth has that little idiot Elsie been up to now?"

"I've brought something to show you," said Tinker; and he drew from his note-case the letter from Lady Beauleigh's solicitors informing him of the unexpected increase of his banking account.

For all that she could have repeated the contents of the letter without taking it from its envelope, the Lady Noggs took it from its envelope and read it slowly with the air of one making her first acquaintance with those contents.

"This is nice," she said. "You'll be able to marry Elsie out of hand. She can't talk of ruining your career now."

"There would always be the law of complemental sex attraction left," said Tinker, smiling faintly. "But you don't think I can accept this money, do you?"

"Why ever not?"

"I can't take money from that old wretch, though she is my step-grandmother," said Tinker gloomily.

"You can't?" said the Lady Noggs with unabated surprise.

"No, not after the way she treated my mother," said Tinker. "I told you about it. She treated her brutally. She ought to have been hanged for it."

"Women so often ought to be hanged for the

way they treat other women," said the Lady Noggs. "But it is so many years ago."

"I don't see that time makes any difference to a thing like that. The old wretch wants her neck wringing as much as ever she did," said Tinker savagely.

Considering what she knew of the Dowager Lady Beauleigh, the Lady Noggs was disposed to believe that his statement was not unwarranted.

"It just seems to me infernal cheek, her offering me this money, or to be exact, forcing it on me. I won't take money from her, alive or dead."

The Lady Noggs had seldom seen him so stirred; and she saw that her well-meant and admirable scheme had come to naught. She could not even suggest that his step-grandmother was making a tardy reparation; she knew too much of her real motives.

"What did your father say?" she said.

"He wouldn't say anything at all," said Tinker. "But I could see that he was awfully pleased when I said I wouldn't touch the old wretch's money."

"I don't see how you can take it if you feel about her like that. I did not understand that she had treated your mother so badly as that," said the Lady Noggs. "No; it's quite impossible."

"I knew you would see it," said Tinker, his face clearing. "I'm going to write to her and return the check as soon as Coutts have cleared it."

"I shouldn't be very hard on her. She may have meant well," said the Lady Noggs, feeling bound to do something to lighten for Lady Beauleigh the rebuff her suggestion had brought on her.

"Oh, I shall write as civil a letter as possible. It would be no use doing anything else. A woman like that would never understand. She couldn't."

The Lady Noggs felt relieved.

"Yes. That would be best," she said. "By the way, if you're not engaged, I want you to come down to Stonorill for the week-end. I'm going to ask Elsie. And Susie Red and Reggie Pollifax are coming, and one or two other people."

"I shall be awfully pleased to come," said Tinker; and the clouds cleared quite soon from his face.

"Perhaps the Stonorill gardens in the moonlight will soften Elsie's hard heart," she said, smiling.

"Not a chance of it. It's iron—wrought iron, not cast. All the same, I'll worry her again in those same moonlit gardens."

"That's right; there's nothing like hammering away. She must give way one of these days. Be-



sides, it's all for her good. She'll be miserable if she doesn't marry you."

"So shall I," said Tinker.

When later he left her, she sighed once for the failure of her so nearly successful plan, and at once proceeded to cudgel her brains with greater vigor than ever to find a better one.

CHAPTER X

THE LADY NOGGS SUCCEEDS

FOR the next three days the Lady Noggs, in the few intervals of leisure she contrived to snatch from the whirling season, continued to cudgel her unresponsive brain for that more successful scheme. It produced no such scheme. At the same time she was busy arranging her house-party at Stonorill. She took unusual pains with it, for she wished the duchess to see as much as possible of Sue, and for that reason she made it small. She meant the duchess to enjoy it also, and therefore she invited Lady Bannersdale, who was of the same age as the duchess. They would amuse each other by an untiring recapitulation of the scandalous chronicle of the last thirty years. She invited Lord Scarsleigh, one of the most agreeable old gossips in London, because he would lend them his most enthusiastic assistance in that recapitulation.

Having arranged for the pleasure of her elders,

she set about providing for the young folk. Sue and Lord Pollifax would amuse each other, and would probably like nothing better than to be left alone to perform that agreeable task. Tinker and Elsie would also be happiest in each other's society. But with a scarcely formulated idea of softening Elsie's obdurate heart by presenting to her eyes yet further examples of happy lovers, the Lady Noggs added to the party Miss Brainsford and Lord Doughty, who were about to be married in the course of next month.

Lord Errington would, of course, discharge the duties of host, but she was still a man short; there were six women and only five men. She thought of Michael, and at once dismissed the idea. With three pairs of lovers about, the air of Stonorill would surely be bad for Michael. Then it occurred to her that he needed a change—that he deserved a reward for the steadiness with which he had been working. It further occurred to her that she would have great difficulty in finding so late in the week a man who would so well fit into her party. But still she could not quite persuade herself that she found these reasons enough for inviting him to so dangerous an air. Then it occurred to her that he ought to see Sue, that he would want to make a

portrait of her, that Lord Pollifax ought by no means to be deprived of the pleasure the possession of such a portrait would give him. She felt too that she had no right to rob Michael of the excellent advertisement he would get from a portrait of so popular a celebrity as Sue. She resolved to invite him.

Michael accepted the invitation, which she delivered herself by word of mouth, with effusion, and the remark that it would be splendid.

On the Saturday morning she received a letter from the Dowager Lady Beauleigh, informing her of Tinker's refusal of the five thousand a year. It teemed with protestations of her bitter sense of injury and wrong. But it seemed very likely indeed to the Lady Noggs that she was finding the reflection that she could continue to save her beloved twenty-five thousand a year no little consolation in her disappointment at having failed once again to become a ruling spirit in the House of Beauleigh. The Lady Noggs dictated a civil sympathetic answer to her plaint, and dismissed the good lady from her mind till the moment, which she foresaw to be inevitable, when her thirst for social glory should induce her to thrust herself on her attention.

She drove her car down to Chelsea to pick up

Michael, in a pleasant cheerfulness. Since he was going to Stonorill, she had had little difficulty in persuading herself that she was bound to do the thing thoroughly and drive him down. Doubtless it was the reward of this thoroughness that she found the drive exceedingly pleasant, and that in spite of the fact that she had several times to rebuke him for spoiling her driving by slipping his arm round her waist.

Michael protested with such earnestness that he really could not help his arm stealing round her, that she was almost compelled to believe him; and ascribing the action to the natural ebullience of industrious youth on a holiday, she decided that it was unworthy of her serious attention.

Since they were looking forward to enjoying a pleasant time, and were not going to Stonorill because it was their duty to see their names inscribed in the pages of the British Press as having formed members of a distinguished gathering, her guests were all assembled at an early hour on the Saturday afternoon; and it would have been difficult to find in the rest of England a group containing more charming, or more diverse types of beauty.

They played croquet or lawn tennis, and finding that the education of Sue and Michael in the matter

of croquet had been neglected, Lord Pollifax and the Lady Noggs set about repairing that neglect in a series of matches. The progress of Sue, compared with that of Michael, demonstrated that the art of dancing is a far better preparation for games of skill than the art of painting.

The duchess took very kindly to Sue, as the Lady Noggs had assured her she would; and after dinner she took the opportunity to give Lord Pollifax the lecture on the married state which she so rarely failed to deliver to members of her family about to embark on that perilous venture.

Then she congratulated him with unaffected warmth on having found such a nice girl to share its perils with him, and ended by saying: "And mind you ask me to your wedding. Susan tells me that it is to be quite quiet to avoid those newspaper reporters. But I should like to come, and I'll bring Errington with me."

When later in the evening the duchess told the Lady Noggs of her intention of being present at the wedding, the Lady Noggs said: "But whatever will Uncle Sigismund say? Won't he scold you?"

"Oh, I expect he'll sulk," said the duchess cheer-





fully. "But, you see, that affair of Edward's is settled."

"I see," said the Lady Noggs thoughtfully.

"And Errington's going to the wedding will make a lot of difference. Sigismund thinks a lot of Errington."

"That's all right," said the Lady Noggs.

The house-party was going excellently, and the Lady Noggs was entirely content with it save for one thing, and that was that Tinker was not enjoying it. She did not know whether the sight of happy lovers was having the effect on Elsie which she had desired; but the effect of that sight on Tinker was to bring home to him with painful clearness his own forlorn and hopeless condition. The Lady Noggs knew him too well not to perceive that he was not happy. He never seemed to abate his light cheerfulness, indeed; but she was quick to perceive that it was a little forced, a little lacking in its old careless spontaneity; and she did not miss the trouble in his eyes.

When they were not playing games there was a tendency on the part of her younger guests to divide up into pairs and leave her and Michael to entertain each other, a task that presented no difficulty to

them. But all the while she kept her eyes open to seize any chance which presented itself of a final successful intervention in the affairs of the obdurate Elsie.

It was not till the Sunday afternoon, after tea, that an idea came to her, and with her usual quickness she lost no time putting it into action. She contrived to draw the unsuspecting Elsie away from the others on a stroll through the gardens. Talking idly of the other members of the party, they came to a sun-dial set in a turfy ring below the level of the rest of the lawn in the middle of which it stood, and sat down on the bank of the ring.

Presently Elsie rose, and going to the dial said: "*Pereunt et imputantur?* What does this inscription mean? I've often wondered, and meant to ask, and forgotten."

"It means that the hours run to waste and are scored up against you," said the Lady Noggs.

Elsie sighed softly, and a faint troubled frown creased her forehead.

"Talking of wasted hours," said the Lady Noggs, "Tinker tells me that you've quite made up your mind not to marry him."

"Of course I have. How could I? He must marry some one with money," said Elsie quickly.

"Of course he must," said the Lady Noggs with a ready agreement which, to judge from the way her face fell, Elsie seemed to find a little discomfiting.

But she said: "Besides, it isn't only that. But it wouldn't last; we're not really suited to each other; we're too exactly alike."

"Ah, yes; the law of complemental sex attraction—Tinker told me about it. It seems to me that there's a great deal in it," said the Lady Noggs with conviction. "I don't wonder that you've made up your mind."

Elsie looked yet more disheartened at this complete acceptance of her point of view.

The Lady Noggs said nothing for a while; then she said slowly: "It seems to me that I ought to come to Tinker's rescue, poor boy."

"You?" said Elsie quickly.

"Yes. If you come to look at it, I seem to meet all the conditions. I have plenty of money, and my family can pull all the strings there are to pull. So it would be an excellent thing for his career," said the Lady Noggs dispassionately.

"Yes," said Elsie in a faint voice.

"And the law of complemental sex attraction comes in, too—wonderfully. He's fair and I'm

dark. He has blue eyes and mine are brown. He's tall and I'm of middle height. He's as cool as cool can be—it's impossible to upset him—and I'm impulsive and rather hot-tempered. There's no doubt that we match exactly, as far as that scientific law goes."

Elsie said nothing; she was staring at the Lady Noggs with eyes very wide open, as if she really saw her distinctly for the first time. And her eyes were full of trouble.

"I think I could get Tinker very fond of me with a little trouble, nearly as fond of me as he is of you," said the Lady Noggs in a musing tone.

"But Michael?" said Elsie in a rather breathless voice.

"Oh, yes; I am rather fond of Michael, of course," said the Lady Noggs, blushing faintly. "But that's purely a girlish fancy, and I know it. That will pass."

"Oh?" said Elsie faintly.

"Of course it will. It's very nice; but it will pass. I couldn't marry Michael. He's a dear child; but I can't see him as my husband. But Tinker—Tinker is much more the kind of man I shall marry. And I can't go on seeing him being unhappy; we've been friends for so long. You don't want him. I

think I could help him over his unhappiness. And then—well, don't you think that he and I are exactly suited to each other?"

"Yes, you are," cried Elsie. "I know it, and I've known it a long time. But—but—I don't know why it is—I can't understand it—you're just the one woman I couldn't bear to see him marry. Yet it's inevitable—and—and I hate it."

She leaned back against the pillar of the dial, her delicate paleness a dull white; her eyes full of pain; her pretty face contorted in an anguish of jealousy.

"But this is extraordinary!" cried the Lady Noggs. "We've always been such friends. You don't want him; why do you grudge my marrying him? Isn't it rather greedy?"

Elsie wrung her hands.

"I know—I know—I can't understand it. I can't explain it. But it's—it's too strong for me. But oh—any one but you, Noggs!"

Then with a sob she stumbled out of the ring, into the shrubbery, and passed out of sight.

The Lady Noggs looked after her with grave eyes; then she rose and came quickly back to the house.

At dinner that night she had Tinker on her right hand, and put Elsie at the farther end of the table.

She set herself to amuse Tinker, and all through dinner they talked and laughed together, leaving the rest of the party out of their talk as far as might be.

The Lady Noggs kept a covert eye on Elsie. She saw her forehead knitted in a troubled frown all the while; she ate nothing. Lord Scarsleigh seemed to find it impossible to get her to talk to him, and turned to Sue, who was sitting on his left. Once the Lady Noggs saw Elsie's gentle eyes resting on her with a look almost of hate.

At the end of dinner, just before going to the drawing-room, she said to Tinker: "Do you believe in striking while the iron's hot?"

"Rather," said Tinker.

"Then strike, and go on striking," said the Lady Noggs, and she rose.

When they came into the drawing-room, Elsie went straight across it with a rather hurried step, and out through the long windows into the garden. When the men joined them, Tinker looked round the room. The Lady Noggs caught his eye and nodded to the windows; he went quietly through them.

After talking a while in the drawing-room, Sue and Lord Pollifax, then Miss Brainsford and Lord

Doughty, drifted out into the garden. Presently the Lady Noggs and Michael followed them, leaving the duchess, Lady Bannersdale, Lord Scarsleigh, and Lord Errington talking together earnestly about the unfortunate career of a vanished statesman.

The moon was bright, the warm air, fragrant with the scent of many flowers, was still. The Lady Noggs felt an unusual dreamy oppression stealing over her, and she made no effort to throw it off. Michael seemed to be under the same oppression, for his words came few and long between.

They went into the Dutch garden, and the low voices of Miss Brainsford and Lord Doughty in one of the corners sent them wandering on. They went into the rose-garden, where the air was still more fragrant. They were turning into an alley, when before them in the middle of it they saw Elsie and Tinker. His arm was round her, and he was bending down to kiss her. They turned hastily, and came out of the rose-garden.

As they crossed the threshold of its gates Michael sighed.

"We—we seem rather out of it," said the Lady Noggs in an uncertain voice, hardly knowing what

"Let's not be," said Michael quickly, with a little gasp; and he slipped his arm round her and drew her to him.

The dreamy oppression, heavy, unnerving, seemed to hold her bound; for, unresisting, she let him kiss her, and quivered to the touch of his lips.

He kissed her again and said: "Oh, Noggs, dear, let's get married soon. It'll be splendid!"

"Get married?" said the Lady Noggs dreamily. "Oh, we'll talk about that in two or three years—when we've done growing."

THE END











